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WHERE THREE CREEDS MEET

A Tale of Modern Indian Life

BY

John J. CAMPBELL OMAN

AUTHOR OF 'INDIAN LIFE, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL,' 'THE GREAT INDIAN EPICS,' ETC.

LONDON

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To my dear Wife this little book is most affectionately inscribed.

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CHAPTER I.

THE VILLAGE.

AN Eastern village, populous, compact and untidy, wedded to old-world notions, and with all the elements of picturesque and tragic life slumbering within it—such is Mozung, situated in a vast plain overlooked by the stately domes and minarets of the famous city of Lahore. It is inhabited for the most part by Muhammadans, whose turbulent ancestors established themselves on the spot in the lawless and stirring days of a not very distant past. Within the boundaries of the village are also to be found a goodly sprinkling of prosperous Hindus, whose presence serves to keep alive there the smouldering embers of the antagonism, universal, bitter, and centuries old, which exists between the followers of Hinduism and Islâm.

The general appearance of Mozung is strikingly suggestive of a time when the inhabitants had to be perpetually on the defensive against marauding bands.

The backs of the houses, tall and windowless, built in a continuous closed line, with a rare break here and there for entrance and exit, form a

WHERE THREE CREEDS MEET

'Did you notice,' said the driver's companion in the dogcart, 'what a very beautiful girl that was? A perfect picture between girlhood and womanhood. By Jove! her glorious dark eyes did flash fire, while her lips were trembling between crying and smiling.'

'I did not notice whether she was pretty or ugly,' was the reply. 'I had enough to do to keep from running over the lot of them, and I don't believe, old man, you could have really seen her dark flashing eyes and all that. You are gone on these Easterns, you are, and you let your imagination run away with you.'

'Well, anyway, *you* don't love them, but all the same you lost a treat in missing that girl's pretty face, I can tell you. Our artists at home don't get models like her very often.'

'Rot!' said his companion, laughing; 'I see that the glamour of the East is *still* affecting you; but you'll soon get over that. One twelvemonth here will cure you!'

Without noticing this snub, the younger man said to his companion:

'What do you call that thing—the veil I mean—which the girl and boy were squabbling about?'

'A *burqa*—that is what it is called,' was the reply.

'A *burqa*, is it? Well, I wonder what the East would be without the *burqa*, without the seclusion of its women.'

'A very different place indeed! Take away the *burqa*, or whatever may do duty for it, and the entire life of the Muslim world and of India, whether Hindu or Muhammadan, would be profoundly

changed. There is a lot of romance under the *burqa*, I can tell you; perhaps a great deal too much; but it exists, necessarily, under conditions very different from those familiar to our world. Take *my* word for it, the *burqa* can be raised by a soft hand to show a pretty face or figure, when the fair wearer is so disposed, and can be lowered, as a complete and impenetrable disguise, to avoid recognition in inconvenient or compromising places and circumstances.'

'Oh! I have no hesitation whatever in taking *your* word for such important matters. You——'

'Shut up now!' was the laughing interruption. 'Don't try to be facetious. I was going to say that possibly the possession of the *burqa* is quite as much prized by the members of the weaker sex, for reasons of their own, as by their lords and masters who have imposed it.'

'That is probable enough,' said the younger man, with a twinkle in his eye—'probable enough.'

'Yes, it is,' remarked the elder; and then continued, almost in the same breath: 'Did you meet Jones at the Institute to-day? No? Then it will be news to you that he is ordered off to the Frontier, and that Mrs. Jones is going to Simla. By Jove! there will be fine larks for somebody.'

Both men laughed, and the lively and very human tableau of the previous minute was for the time effaced from their minds by thoughts of poor old Jones and the not too straitlaced wife of his bosom.

As the dogcart disappeared down the road, the little maiden readjusted her veil as quickly as possible, while the boy who had molested her ran away, jeer-

ing and laughing. In impotent anger the girl took up a fragment of brick which was lying near her, and flung it after him, with an unaccustomed hand, as he scampered down the now almost lonely street. She could not help smiling at her own awkwardness when the piece of brick fell only a few feet from her, and in a wrong direction; but, feeling that she *ought* to assert her dignity—for to her, at present, the *burqa* was a symbol of her permanent if recent promotion to womanhood—she began to pout in order to hide her smiles, and went towards Mozung as quickly as her draggling slippers would allow her to cover the ground, declaring in indignant tones that she would get the boy punished for the unpardonable outrage.

He, meanwhile, had crossed the brickwork culvert over which the road passes into the village, and, running by the small mosque at the corner of the street, had disappeared from view.

Following in his wake, little Lateefun turned homewards, her face wet with petulant tears, for she had worked herself into a resentful frame of mind at the affront she had received, and she was closely followed by Abdulla, the elder of the two boys. They took a short cut over the *maidân* (open plain), which is the village playground, and entered the main street of Mozung, passing on their right the mosque of Nizam Shah with its delusive façade of imitation domes and minarets. At the cistern, fed from a well beside the mosque, a donkey was quenching its thirst and a she-buffalo, with eager eyes and lumbering move-

ments, was approaching the water, followed by her calf. The young people had to make way for the animals, the road being narrow, but as soon as they had got clear of them they hurried along the familiar route without glancing at the high blank walls, or the small doorways, to the right and to the left of them. They did not even pause at the stand-pipe, where several children were cooling their naked feet in the water, nor were they tempted to linger by the delicacies in the bazaar, where the fruiterers and greengrocers had their ill-kept but well-filled stalls, and where the cooks and confectioners had arranged their culinary preparations on low wooden tables on the roadside, amidst a strange complex of odours.

Lateefun, who had been nursing her wrath, was by this time in no mood to loiter, and all her companion seemed to care for was to be near her.

When she and Abdulla reached the large well which stands on the right of the main street they turned down a side lane. Here they parted, in silence, and Lateefun, entering her home, rushed impetuously up the narrow stairs and told her mother, in breathless haste, how her cousins, returning from school, had, by pre-arrangement, called for her at Belatun's house, where she had been to learn embroidery of a new English fashion, and how that little *shaitân* (fiend) Muhammad had grossly insulted her on the highway—yes, on the public road, and before some English sahibs too.

'Never mind, my life,' said her mother, when she had patiently heard the whole story. 'Don't cry about that naughty cousin of yours. The little

scamp whom I reared from babyhood has not yet become accustomed to your wearing a *burqa*. He thinks you are a child still, and does not remember that you are soon to be married.'

'The little fiend never remembers anything,' sobbed the girl. 'I hate him!'

'Let it pass,' said the mother, wiping away Lateefun's tears, 'let it pass;' and holding her by the shoulders, while the mellow light of the western sky streamed softly in upon her from the window, she went on: 'Oh! my child, it seems but yesterday that your father—peace be unto him—betrothed you to Sher Afghan's son, and *now* you are to be married—and it is time too,' glancing with pride, as she uttered these words, at the budding beauties of the lovely girl, not yet fourteen years old, whose delicate face and sensitive lips bore eloquent testimony to a long line of refined ancestors.

They were strikingly alike, the parent and child, as they stood together; and though the mother's luxuriant wavy hair was white as snow, her eyes were still bright, and her smile had not quite lost the charm which had once nearly brought her husband to grief at a Newab's Court, in former days. She came of an ancient and noble, but decayed and almost extinct, Mogul family, and was commonly spoken of in the village as the *Mogláni*. Her late husband, a gentleman of courtly manners, well versed in Persian literature, and himself no mean poet, had shared in the final downfall of the last puppet Emperor of Delhi, and, like a host of other similarly placed Muhammadan gentlemen, had lost his former

means of living and had gradually gravitated to a social stratum far below what he and his ancestors had once occupied.

With her eyes still on Lateefun, the old lady remarked, thinking of the girl's future husband:

'He comes of a bold and pious stock, and it is well that thou shouldst be his bride, little one; for, though evil times have come upon us all, thy kith and kin have been men of mark in the courts of kings; but the Hindu—may the curse of God rest upon him!—has everything now. Look at the fine mansions those detestable idolaters are building for themselves over there, while we of the stock of the once ruling race have to live in discomfort and indigence!'

These words were uttered with some bitterness by the *Moglâni*, as she stood at the window and pointed to some of the lofty three- and four-storied houses which were in view. While she was still looking at them a conch was sounded and several bells set ringing in a Hindu temple close by. As the loud booming of the shell and the tinkling of the bells reached her, the old lady put her hands over her ears to keep out the unwelcome sounds.

By this time the twilight was quickly fading out of the sky, and it was getting somewhat gloomy in the chamber which had but this one window, barred across with Oriental suspicion and jealousy. Lateefun rose and lit a lamp—a quaint copper lamp of curious antique pattern, a relic of better days. Though it gave but a dim light, that was sufficient to show a pile of things lying

upon a *charpoy* (cot)—wedding-presents for the bride, who, quite forgetting her little trouble with her cousin Muhammad, began to examine them with curious interest, as, indeed, she had done twenty times before. She passed the soft textile fabrics tenderly, but critically, through her slender fingers, and turned the gold and silver ornaments over and over again with childish satisfaction, weighing them in the palm of her hand, as if she were mentally valuing them, and perhaps she was. She had never possessed, and seldom seen, such things before. The mere handling of them delighted her; but she was not above being gratified by the knowledge that they had cost a good deal of money, and that there were probably more presents to come.

As she turned over and examined now one and now another of the soft delicate tissues which lay on the cot, a subtle perfume of blended musk and sandal-wood, of rose and jasmine, came from them, pervading the entire chamber; and, in the scented atmosphere, Lateefun sat on a faded carpet of rare texture, and thought in silence of the contrast between the rich fabrics she had been handling and her mother's wardrobe of discoloured and moth-eaten garments. Breaking the silence, she said:

'Mother dear, you *must* share these lovely things with me. I could never take them *all*.'

In response to which generous impulse the *Moglâni* passed her hand caressingly over the girl's head and drew it gently to her bosom.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAGE GREEN.

THE day's work was over, the oppressively warm day of early summer had ended; and presently, as the bright moon appeared on the horizon, a hubbub of voices and cheery shouts arose from the *maidân* (plain), where the young people were assembling for their evening games.

A gentle tap at the open door of the house where Lateefun lived was answered by old Begum, who, as domestic slave and hired servant, had been in the family for as long as she could remember.

'What is the matter?' she asked the boys who stood outside, and were no other than the little scapegrace who had been teasing Lateefun near the *syad's* grave, and his more sedate companion.

'There is nothing the matter; only we are going to play on the *maidân*, and bought some sweetmeats on the way. Here they are,' said Abdulla, shyly handing the old woman a hollow cone of leaves, in which the sweetmeats were neatly arranged. It was no doubt a peace-offering.

'Your aunt is angry with you,' said Begum in a hoarse, cracked voice, as she took the sweets in her

wrinkled hands; 'she is very angry. I heard her say so. You have been annoying Lateefun, pulling off her *burqa* on the highway, before the very eyes of English sahibs—and she to be married so soon! Have you no respect for your uncle's house?'

'I have not been annoying anyone,' answered Abdulla sulkily; and with that the two boys went away, the elder saying between his teeth: 'You young *shaitân*, you always get me into trouble!' at which reproach Muhammad only laughed derisively.

The heat was oppressive in the narrow lane, for breeze there was none, and the boys moved along listlessly in the fetid air, between the rows of high houses which had been baking all day in the Indian sun. But their spirits revived and their steps quickened as soon as they reached the open plain, a veritable fairy playground under the witchery of the summer moonlight which was streaming in a golden flood over a line of high-terraced roofs, and through the pierced-masonry screens with which many of the houses were surmounted. Only a few dim lights twinkled here and there in the village; but on the opposite side of the *maidân*, beyond the long white road, the yellow glow of petroleum lamps filled, and sharply defined, all the wide-open windows of those neighbouring European houses whose occupants had not the good fortune to be able to migrate to 'the hills' for the hot season.

In one of these houses the punkah was swinging lazily over the elders, engaged in a game of cards; while three or four children, all in white clothes, were romping outside, as only children can, on their

own lawn in the inviting moonlight, which was almost as bright as day. The air was cooler and far purer here than in the village, and was pervaded with a faint perfume of jasmine and rose from the bushes in the garden. Little Daisy Baxter, the eldest, was also the soul of this juvenile party.

On the *maidân* itself scores of young people were assembling to play various national games, and were busy, amidst noisy mirth, arranging the business of the evening.

'There is the fellow who is to marry Lateefun—that big, ugly lout Hakam Ali!'

It was Abdulla who spoke, looking in the direction of a tall young man, in clean white clothes, standing in the middle of the field.

'Big he is, but not ugly,' remarked Muhammad, with just a touch of malice in his tone, for he was of a naturally spiteful disposition. 'They say he is a wonderful wrestler for his age.'

'I should like a tussle with him.'

'What nonsense! he is much too big for you; he is a man.'

'And so am *I*,' said Abdulla.

To which little Muhammad, drawing himself up, responded:

'And so am *I*,' prudently keeping the while out of reach of his elder brother's arm.

'Well, man or no man, he is an uneducated fool! He knows no English, and has not even passed the middle-school examination. He is a fool, that's what he is!'

Talking thus, the brothers came upon the green, if it can be called so.

A number of young fellows, stripped, except for a small loin-cloth, had taken up their positions, and the words '*Kubdy! Kubdy! Kubdy!*' shouted here and there and everywhere, indicated that the game had commenced. The night was hot, but the agile runners, whose dark, well-knit bodies moved rapidly about over the ground with easy grace, seemed to care little for the high temperature, though their wet skins shone quite brightly in the moonlight. Their hearty shouting proved that they were enjoying themselves, and it was apparent that this favourite game of theirs, characterized by a deal of vigorous running about, was being played that evening with no little spirit.

As soon as an opportunity offered, Abdulla joined the men on the *maidân*, and his brother the small boys, who were for the most part playing on the cross-road by the lamp-post. The different games were continued energetically for an hour or more, till a loud altercation in a corner of the field attracted general attention.

'What is the matter? Who is hurt? What has happened?' queried several voices.

'Abdulla has broken his arm,' cried one of the players. 'That tall fellow from Peshawar was the cause of it, bad luck to him!'

'Yes, he was the cause of it,' said another; 'but Abdulla was always running in his way, and seemed anxious to spoil his game.'

'Oh, you don't like Abdulla,' said a small boy,

addressing the last speaker, 'because he is the Padre sahib's favourite pupil.'

While they were thus discussing the accident, the injured lad himself passed them, closely attended by his little brother and many friends; but, though his collar-bone was certainly broken, he bore himself bravely, and left the ground almost fainting with pain, yet without a single word of complaint. Muhammad, however, could not restrain his tears when he saw his brother's ashy face and the right arm hanging helplessly at his side. The sturdy visitor from Peshawar who had caused the accident, and who was addressed by his companions as Hakam Ali, was full of apologies and regrets for the accident, but, somehow, his protestations did not seem quite genuine.

Abdulla's serious accident naturally produced a sensation among the youthful players, who broke up into little knots to discuss the event, and so the games came to an untimely end that evening.

As players and spectators were taking their respective ways homeward, a woman's voice, clear and loud, floated with melancholy sweetness on the still air. She sang, with practised skill, a verse of a popular poem, and, as she ceased, the refrain was taken up by another female voice from another housetop, and this was repeated, in melodious iteration, again and again.

'That is Moradun singing,' said Lateefun to her mother, as they sat together on the flat roof of their high house, enjoying the comparative coolness of the upper air. 'What a wonderfully sweet voice

she has, and what a number of songs she knows—even whole stories in verse!'

'Yes, Moradun sings sweetly enough, but her songs are mostly about the gods whom she has forsaken. She is a Mussulmani now, and ought to give up singing those love-songs about Krishna and the Gopies, which, I think, is what she is singing now.'

'Moradun was, and at heart is still, a Gopi,' said Lateefun with a laugh.

'That, I fear, is true; but as she has, for her own reasons, embraced our holy faith, she should at least cease singing songs about gods being in love with milkmaids.'

'It is only poetry, mother. Moradun told me so.'

'The less you talk to her about such *poetry* the better for you, my child.'

'Don't you like Moradun, mother?'

'One can't help liking the girl, she has such an amiable disposition, and is so full of spirits; but you need not talk to her about her Hindu poetry.'

'Very well, mother.'

The music that the *Moglâni* and Lateefun were listening to was Hindu music, giving melodious expression to the joys and sorrows of the race. It was highly complex, with its differences of mere quarter tones, and, even when cheerful, never free from a subtle undercurrent of melancholy.

The musical contest went steadily on, pleasing the wakeful and lulling the drowsy into pleasant slumbers. Not a soul in the village dreamed of protesting against it. Even Abdulla, as he lay in pain

upon his bed and listened to the soft cadences, was soothed by an agreeable sense of companionship with the songstresses, who were not unknown to him.

Muhammad had fallen asleep, notwithstanding desperate efforts to keep his eyes open, and Abdulla was quite alone with his thoughts and his pain; but he need not have been alone had he allowed his friends to stay with him, or to inform his good aunt of the accident he had met with.

However, the night wore on, and yet the two women sang, for a wager, alternate strophe and antistrophe, all through the night, till the brightening dawn summoned the village-folk to the business of the day.

CHAPTER III.

MAHIR DIN.

AND the business of the day to which Mozung aroused itself was not wholly unpleasant; for as soon as possible after daybreak there was to be an exciting and much looked-forward-to race between two *ekkas* —light and strong, but springless two-wheeled one-horse vehicles, which may be likened, in some respects, to the chariots of the ancient world. Of these *ekkas*, or chariots, one belonged to Mahir Din, a native of and great favourite in Mozung; the other was the property of a woman in the city.* There had been much betting on the race, and considerable local excitement and rivalry over it.

For days previously Mahir's horse had been carefully guarded by his friends, and the city people had been quite as careful about their animal; but the partisans on both sides had also, in true Eastern fashion, been trying the arts of magic and necromancy to overcome their opponents. Spells and ceremonies had been freely employed to injure the

* The city (*shahr*) of Lahore is the crowded portion adjoining the fort and the old Imperial Palace, built so as to be defensible, and provided with thirteen substantial and stately gateways.

rival horse; and, as a consequence, counter-spells had also been carefully resorted to, and many soothsayers, and impostors generally, had pocketed good fees for their services. Talismans of all kinds had also been in requisition. On the pegs to which Mahir's horse used to be tethered might have been seen pieces of paper written over with protective *mantras* (spells) of great potency, while flowers and other things had been strewn about the stables to keep off evil influences. Both parties had been hard at work endeavouring to secure success. But on the day just preceding the race, Mahir Din, far-sighted and practical man that he was, had thought of another and supreme precaution which might serve him materially in the coming contest.

Thus he argued with himself: 'If Hindu *bhuts* (demons) should be sent by my rivals to molest my horse, surely I could keep them off effectually by hanging a small piece of beef under my chariot, for they have an intense abhorrence of beef; and similarly Muhammadan demons would undoubtedly fly from the flesh of the filthy swine.' He smiled at his own cleverness, and rubbed his hands with glee.

But how to manage this business? The beef he could himself easily get from any Muslim butcher, and secretly attach it to the *ekka*, but the obtaining of pork was a far more difficult and serious matter; for he was himself a Muhammadan, and, if he were known to have had anything to do with such an utter abomination as pig's flesh, the religious scruples of his Muslim brethren would be

painfully outraged, and he himself would surely be promptly excommunicated.

While he was revolving this important matter in his mind, standing outside his stables, Moradun came along the road, casting a wistful look in his direction.

'Come here, Moradun,' he said pleasantly; 'I have not had a talk with you for a long time.'

The girl's face beamed with pleasure as she approached him.

'You never notice me now,' she said.

'Never notice you? Surely that is not the case; but I have been so busy of late, and besides, my feelings have been very sore, for you have become friendly with Ajeet Singh, *mistree*. Eh?'

'You know very well that that is *not* true,' said Moradun reproachfully, blushing very prettily under her brown skin. 'How can you say such things?'

'What, have I not seen him talking to you?'

'How should I prevent the *mistree* (carpenter) talking to me? Has he not known me since I was a *butcha* (little one), no higher than his knee?'

'Oh, yes! I dare say he has known you a long time, and is very fond of you too.'

'I don't know about that; but I know he would like me to drink the *pauhl*.'*

'Indeed! would he? But you would not do it, surely? Would you become a Sikh, become a Hindu, and go back to the worship of idols? Would you?'

* Drinking the *pauhl* is an essential part of the ceremony of formal admission into the Sikh community.

'The Sikhs do *not* worship idols. There are no idols in the Guru *Dwarah*.'

'But surely the Sikhs are Hindus and idolaters?'

'Hindus they may be, I don't know; but they are not idolaters. The *mistree* told me they worship *Akal Purkh*, the Timeless One.'

'Well, whoever or whatever the *mistree* may worship, I hope you will keep clear of *him*. And now, dear one, I want you to do something for *me*. Will you do it?'

'My life is at your service,' murmured the girl.

'Very good, and well said; but it is to be a secret and dangerous business,' and he winked slyly.

'If it has anything to do with Lateefun, I don't want to hear about it,' was the somewhat brusque response.

'No, no, you jealous creature, it has nothing to do with Lateefun, nor with the Sikh *mistree*, but with the great race that is to come off to-morrow.'

'Then command me, I am your slave,' was the smiling reply.

He explained his ingenious plan to the girl, who quite appreciated its cleverness and importance. He then asked her point-blank to get the pork for him, and to attach it secretly to the *ekka* without the knowledge of any other living soul.

When Moradun heard him out, she said with much feeling:

'I, too, am a Muslim, Mahir Din. You have quite forgotten that I gave up the gods of my forefathers and repeated the *Kulma* (the Muslim confession of faith) in the *Musjid* last *Eed* only to please you.'

'Oh no, I have not forgotten it, Moradun. Is it possible I could do so? I often think of it, but do this for me, dear, and after the race is won we will talk about the *nikah* (marriage) that is to follow.'

Saying this, he pulled her chin affectionately, while he placed his left hand on her shoulder.

'You have said so before,' replied the girl, looking with tender reproach into his gray eyes, 'but I will do this thing for you, Mahir Din, whatever it may cost me.'

'You promise that?'

'I do.'

Two or three persons now came strolling up the street, and Moradun moved quickly away. She had engaged to do this thing for Mahir Din, and do it she would; but the business was a very inconvenient one, and not a little risky for her, a professed Muhammadan. She sat down in the scanty shade of a tamarisk tree to consider the matter, and while she revolved it in her mind, her eyes wandered, naturally, towards the European houses beyond the *maidân*.

'I have it,' she said, starting up, 'Daisy *baba* will help me,' and off she went, in her impulsive way, in the direction of the house where little Daisy Baxter lived.

Moradun, before she became a Muhammadan, had for years been in the habit of taking milk and butter to the house where Daisy lived, for she was then in the service of a Hindu milkman of the caste in which she was born. She had been widowed when a mere infant, and left at the age of ten an

orphan, without either parent to help or protect her. Once she had been able, at considerable risk to herself, to render some service to Daisy, who always remembered it gratefully, and was ever willing, in her childish way, to do Moradun a good turn. Daisy had been born in the country, and spoke Hindustani sufficiently well to hold easy communication with Moradun.

'Oh, Daisy *baba*,' said the girl, when she reached Mr. Baxter's house and saw Daisy, 'I have come for something which I know you will give me, only you must not tell *anyone* that you have given it to me.'

'I cannot do that, Moradun,' was the child's reply; 'I must tell my papa about it, whatever it may be.'

'Very well, then, tell the sahib if you must, but no one else.'

'Well, and what is it you want?'

'Only a pinch of pigs' meat.'

Daisy laughed merrily.

'Pigs' meat, Moradun? Pigs' meat?—and you a Mussulman! I thought Mussulmans never touched pigs' meat.'

'That is true; but I want it for a very peculiar kind of medicine, miss sahib.'

'Medicine out of pigs' meat? What a funny idea!' and the child laughed again. 'But you shall have some, if there is any in the house.'

Daisy looked about the pantry, and discovering a piece of bacon, cut off a bit, and gave it to Moradun, promising at the same time not to tell anyone about it except her papa.

Away went Moradun, highly delighted with her success, carrying the treasure wrapped up in a scrap of newspaper, concealed beneath her *chudder* (veil). She was too much of a Hindu at heart to feel any real compunction about handling the bacon, although, as a professed Muslim, she dreaded detection and the inevitable obloquy which detection involved. But the risk was taken to oblige Mahir, and she would have done a great deal more than that to please *him*.

At an hour when she expected that only Mahir would be near the *ekka*, she stole quietly into the shed which answered for coachhouse, as if to speak to him. Looking about and assuring herself that no one but Mahir was there, she produced her paper parcel from beneath her *chudder*, and, with a smile, held it up for him to see.

'*Khabardar! Khabardar!*' ('Take care! Take care!') 'Somebody may come in,' said Mahir warningly. 'Be quick!'

The girl laughed, and with beating heart, for she felt the importance of her act, fixed her bit of bacon, as inconspicuously as possible, under the seat of the chariot. The dreadful thing was done, and done satisfactorily. Mahir, who was watching her movements, thanked her profusely, though he would not, at that time, have touched her dainty form on any account, polluted as she was by personal contact with the unclean abomination.

Having performed her task, the light-hearted girl, in a spirit of frolic, approached Mahir, extending her right hand towards him as if to catch hold of him;

and, as he shrank from her in real alarm, she ran away laughing merrily, saying as she went:

'I am going to bathe at the well. You need not be afraid of me. *I* have kept my word, haven't I?'

'She means,' thought Mahir, pricked by his upbraiding conscience, 'that I have not kept my word with her. However, there is time enough to think of that matter. Just now I must see to the horse.'

And he went off to feed the animal, giving him *ghee* (clarified butter) and sugar amongst other things. The horse was in excellent form, and his master, who had not omitted to take him out daily for regular training on the appointed racecourse, regarded him with pride and satisfaction.

The race was to come off early the following day. All through the night the horse was diligently guarded from evil men and evil spirits, till at length the eventful morning arrived.

From before dawn people began to move, in a leisurely way, towards the spot where the race was to be run.

In due time, amidst much excitement and noisy shouting, the two *ekkas* appeared, attended by the friends and partisans of their respective owners. Ordinarily an *ekka* carries a light hood or top for protection from sun or rain, but now the tops, with their flapping screens, had been removed, and the two chariots were in proper racing trim, the horses garlanded with flowers and beautified, according to Indian ideas, with patches of bright colour.

A good four miles along the Ferozepore road and back again was the course fixed for the race. After

many preliminaries, much noisy talk, and two or three false starts, the *ekkas* at length went off at a mad gallop, pursued by the encouraging or hostile shouts of drivers and spectators, and accompanied by the riotous jangling of their own brass bells.

Regardless of all consequences, the light springless chariots were made to dash recklessly along the metalled road, bumping and creaking dreadfully. The excitement amongst the assembled crowd was intense. Both chariots were soon out of sight in a cloud of white dust. The betting, already pretty free, became more lively as they disappeared from view. In their eagerness a number of persons followed the chariots along the course, so that they might see them all the earlier on their return towards the goal. After a few minutes the shouts of those who had scurried up the road apprised the rest that the racers were coming back. Presently the *ekka* bells were distinctly audible. The scene became very animated, and the shouting vigorous and discordant, as the two vehicles appeared in a dust-haze rushing along almost side by side. The risk of a collision between the two, which seemed imminent at one time, caused a breathless pause for a moment, particularly as Mahir Din, standing up recklessly on his madly oscillating *ekka*, lashed the rival horse furiously across its face till, throwing up its head, it swerved off the track in frantic terror. At this critical moment Mahir gave its already disconcerted driver a stinging cut with his leather-thonged whip.

'*Shahbash! shahbash!*' ('Bravo! bravo!') shouted

hundreds of voices in enthusiastic approval of his pluck, for this was all fair play according to the recognised rules of such racing. In a few seconds more he passed the goal at a break-neck speed, winning the well-contested race amidst the loud and prolonged plaudits of his friends, who, with reiterated shouts of '*Shahbash! shahbash!*' pressed forward to congratulate him.

The hundreds of spectators who had come out to see the contest were well content with the performance of the charioteers. Mahir's party was quite jubilant. Nothing short of a triumphal procession would satisfy his partisans, and so one was arranged there and then. A band of musicians had been in attendance in expectation of being engaged by the winners. This band, consisting of half a dozen men with brass instruments and drums, was placed in an open wagonette, and made to lead off. Next came the hero of the hour, seated in his victorious *ekka*, crowned and garlanded with flowers. The procession behind him was made up of all who wished to take part in celebrating this victory of Mozung, riding in carriages of all sorts, from *ekkas* and *tum-tums* to phaetons and landaus, which the spirited owners, being residents of Mozung, had placed, gratis, at the disposal of the winning party.

Thus in triumph rode Mahir from the place where the race was run and all through the village, with the band playing before him; while, with the air of a conqueror mightily pleased with himself, he pompously scattered cowry shells and copper coins

amongst the people. There was great rejoicing in the village. Mahir was, for the nonce, the observed of all observers; and he was good to look upon, —a pleasant, well-featured young fellow, with the merriest of twinkles in his gray eyes. He was quite a dandy too, wearing a shirt of the finest flowered white muslin, a green satin waistcoat, and a neatly tied turban of pale pink, surmounted in this instance with wreaths of flowers. As the procession proceeded through the village, it was swelled by the addition of a large number of pedestrians, who, attracted by the music and the shouting, hurried out to see what was going on, and followed in the wake of the carriages. Boys came running down the side lanes shouting to one another, and girls too, with their coloured veils flying behind them in the breeze. Even the matrons laboriously grinding corn in the hand-mill, and busy blacksmiths at their forges, paused a moment from their toils to watch the noisy procession go by.

That little scamp Muhammad was, of course, in the thick of it; but Abdulla lay on his *charpoy* with his broken arm bandaged up by a friend of his, a senior student in the Lahore Medical College.

The noise and the bustle in the street brought Lateefun to an upper window of her house, from which she could just get a glimpse of the procession as it passed down the main street; and, somehow, Mahir's *ekka* stopped, very conveniently, for a minute, in the right place for her to see him in his festive attire and floral adornments. He may have taken a sidelong glance towards her window.

It was not at all unlikely, for little Lateefun was the acknowledged belle of the village, and Mahir Din was by no means insensible to female beauty.

Quite close to him, as he halted in the middle of the narrow street, stood Moradun, all smiles and delight, clothed in spotless white, looking very attractive indeed in her pretty cotton *saree*—for she had not yet adopted Muslim fashion in dress—which fell in graceful folds from her superb figure. There was triumph in her eye. She felt secretly proud of Mahir, and secretly proud of the risk she herself had run for him, and rejoiced in having contributed *her* share towards his victory. She only wished she could have witnessed his dashing success, of which everyone was talking; but modest women were not expected to be present on such occasions, and she had to stay at home while the great race was being run. But Mahir had no eyes for pretty Moradun this morning. Indeed, when he did at last observe her, a slight shade passed over his smiling face, as the thought flashed through his mind: 'What if she should some day tell the world the story of "the abomination," and expose me to ridicule and contempt?'

CHAPTER IV.

ABDULLA.

AFTER the accident he met with on the *maidân*, Abdulla was confined for days to his bed on account of a compound fracture of his collar-bone.

Now eighteen years of age, he had been two years in Lahore, having come from his native village to study in the provincial capital.

There was no furniture in his room except a couple of *charpoys* (native cots) for himself and little Muhammad, and a low desk, just a few inches high, at which he could write, seated on a small blue-and-white-striped cotton carpet which lay on the unmatted floor. Two roughly-made wooden boxes, bound with iron clamps, held all the belongings of the two brothers. The room, lighted by only one small window, was anything but attractive, consequently the boys spent by far the greater portion of their time out of doors, very often in the shady recesses of the public gardens, along with hundreds of other schoolboys and college students, for in Lahore their name is legion.

Abdulla had learned to read English and had acquired some so-called useful knowledge, but what

he knew best and most appreciated was Persian literature. As, disabled by his recent accident, he now lay on his bed near the window of his little room, he conscientiously endeavoured to study his English text-books. He meant, indeed he was quite determined, to succeed at the examination for which he was preparing, and could only hope to do so by diligent application. Work he must, so he took up an English book and read two or three pages of it, but so inattentively that he might as well have left it alone. He put the book down with a yawn and took up another; but though he struggled hard to master its contents, he soon wearied of it also.

'Oh! I am not well enough for this hard work,' he said discontentedly and half aloud.

Throwing his English books under his *charpoy*, he fished up a volume of Persian poetry, which had belonged to his father, and was soon deeply interested in its warm sensuous imagery and soft ravings about love and wine.

The lad did not doubt that there were occult and edifying significations underlying the poet's verses, but he was not too solicitous about finding them. The poetry as it stood had charm, and dangerous charm, enough for his young mind.

His father, who died some years before, had been a *Sufi*, a Muhammadan mystic, and for thirteen years of his life had wandered about the world as a *faquir*. His discourses on religious subjects, well-remembered by his son, in which he always referred to *Rabb* (God) as the universal all-pervading Spirit, and his belief, frequently and impressively stated,

that, in the end, all mankind would be reabsorbed into the Supreme Being, had deeply affected Abdulla's mind, and had tended to deprive the *Shariah* (law) of a great deal of its importance in his eyes.

Although he died when Abdulla was little more than a child, the latter could well remember the earnest way in which his father explained to him that at the final completion of all things there would be no Hindu and no Muhammadan, no Jew and no Christian, and, further, that there was indeed no virtue and no wickedness, for God himself was the author of all men's actions. The boy would also call to mind with what affectionate admiration his father used to speak of *Isa* (Jesus), as the prophet to whom the government of the world had been intrusted. Thus were the boy's sympathies widened, his religious sentiments made more liberal, and the rigid sectarianism of his Muslim creed destroyed, to the great delight of the worthy Christian missionary who conducted his education, and who very soon discovered the boy's singular freedom from Muhammadan bigotry and fanaticism, though he never divined the real cause of his indifference to the dogmatic teaching of Islam. To him, as a missionary of Christ, this mental attitude was a most hopeful sign. He showered his favours on the possible convert, and flattered himself that it was his own powerful and effective teaching which had produced such desirable results. He even spoke of this in confidence amongst his intimate friends.

Abdulla, however, like other *Sufis*, managed to

reconcile his pantheistic ideas with the uncompromising monotheism of Islam. A professed Muslim, he was in fact a mystic whose worship was merely contemplation, or rather meditation on the unity of God. Life for him was a mere journey (*safar*), he himself only a traveller (*salik*) seeking after God. These were his theoretical notions, but when he read of the 'Beloved' in his mystic poetry, he thought not of its allegorical significations nor of *Rabb*, but only of Lateefun, and in all his vain longings after the Infinite the lovely form of his own beloved floated nebulously before his mental vision.

Physically the lad was strong and robust, inheriting as he did from his Pathan mother a good deal of the vigour of her race.

Such by nature and circumstances was Abdulla as, disabled by his broken collar-bone, he lay stretched upon his cot reading Hafiz and dreaming of his beloved. Of course he had many visitors dropping in to inquire after his health, and amongst them came Mahir Din, who, with a sly look in his roguish eyes, did not fail to express his wonder that there should be so much ill-feeling between Abdulla and the young Pathan from Peshawar, who had only recently become acquainted with each other.

Mahir Din, though no scholar, possessing in the way of mental equipment little beyond a serviceable knowledge of reading and writing in his own language, was an exceptionally shrewd and energetic fellow, and fairly prosperous in business, good-

natured if not crossed, thoroughly practical, and a general favourite.

The two young men did not care particularly for each other. Their tastes and pursuits were entirely dissimilar; and yet, having common friends, they were thrown a good deal into each other's company, somewhat to Abdulla's discomfort, as Mahir seemed to have an unpleasant trick of quizzing him on most occasions.

After a few questions about the state of Abdulla's health and his broken collar-bone, Mahir said:

'You would not come to see the race. How was that? It was a grand affair, I can tell you, and the village was delighted with our victory over the city. I have won five hundred rupees by that race. Oh, it was grand fun!' And, saying this, he rubbed his hands together gleefully.

'I *could* not come. How could I, with my broken shoulder?' said Abdulla, somewhat gruffly.

'Yes, I ought to have remembered your arm was very bad at first; but you will be all right in another day or two—Dr. Sarfaraz said so—and you *must* be present at Hakam Ali's wedding as one of the family, or people will say you are jealous of him,' and, laughing loudly, Mahir took his departure.

Abdulla, who had been secretly planning to excuse himself from being one of the wedding-party on the score of his broken collar-bone, now realized, from Mahir's not very good-natured banter, that the excuse would not be readily accepted, and in vexation of spirit he cursed both Mahir Din and Hakim Ali from the bottom of his heart.

He lay musing grimly for a little while, and then, to drive away the unpleasant thoughts which were oppressing him, resumed his book. As he lay reading, a young man entered unannounced, and stood watching him.

'What is that you are reading so intently that you have neither eyes nor ears for your friends?' he inquired.

At the sound of his voice Abdulla put away the book hastily, and would have thrown it under his bed, where the English books lay; but, before he could do so, the visitor took it from his hand, and, drawing Muhammad's *charpoy* forward, sat down upon it. He opened the book in a leisurely way and looked into it.

'The same old story,' he said, as he scanned the pages. 'Persian poetry again! When will you tire of all this unprofitable nonsense about beauty and love, wine and pleasure?' and he read aloud in a droll fashion a few verses in a very agreeable voice. 'Can't you find something more substantial to study, something that will benefit you and others too?'

'What would you have me study? This is the poetry congenial to our race and country, and it is beautiful. You can't deny that.'

'Yes, and much good it has done us! We have a leaning towards, I may say an aptitude for, the study of style, and we have succeeded, and still succeed, in producing men capable of talking elegantly and writing prettily, about trifles or themes worn threadbare; but that is all.'

'But you know this poetry which you condemn is not all *nonsense*,' said Abdulla. 'It has hidden spiritual meanings, and also conveys valuable moral lessons.'

'*Im*moral lessons, surely,' said his companion, laughing.

'What do you want us to do?' inquired Abdulla.

'Something useful and practical, like *this*,' and he began to attend to the bandages about Abdulla's arm, for the visitor was his good friend Sarfaraz, who was completing his professional training in the local medical college.

'Oh, yes, you are always for something *practical*. I should not forget that you are a rationalist, or what our friends call a *Naturee*.'

'*Naturee* or not, I would not spend my time over such nonsense as you do. You will never get through your examination if you go on like this.'

'Oh, yes, I shall! But, Sarfaraz, while *you* tell me to take to what you call useful and *practical* things, the leaders of the different communities are going in for *spiritual* things.'

'What leaders?'

'The Maulavi sahib, for example.'

'Oh! the Maulavi sahib and the Padre sahib, I presume, and Ram Das of the new *Somaj?* Our leaders indeed! Where are they going to lead us to? I can tell you: they are leading us to mutual distrust and hatred. That's what all their zealous preaching and heated controversy is leading to.

Dissension and enmity and strife! Leaders indeed! and not one of those leaders knows so much as the difference between oxygen and nitrogen.'

'The Padre sahib does,' said Abdulla confidently.

'If so, the others don't. That I'll swear. On the way here I heard in the bazaar a hot discussion about some religious matter which seemed likely to end in blows. I stopped for a moment to say, "Don't quarrel, brothers, about shadows; but try, in your generation, to do something useful, something practical." Both disputants turned fiercely upon me, and seemed inclined to be very practical indeed at my expense; but, as their contemplated action did not appear to have the recommendation of *usefulness*, I walked off, and came here to attend to your arm. How is it now?'

'Very much better, brother, through your skill and kindness. Who do you think came to see me yesterday? Gopinath!'

'Do you mean Gopinath of the Bank, who is known as the Reformer?'

'Yes, the same.'

'And what brought *him* here? Is the Hindu reformer a friend of yours?'

'I don't know; but he tells everybody that it is highly desirable that Mussulmans and Hindus should draw together. It is for the good of India, he always says.'

'That sounds well; but Mussulmans and Hindus may amalgamate in the last day, if what you *Sufis* believe about the last day turns out to be true, for then there will be no Mussulmans and no Hindus.

Isn't it so?' said Sarfaraz, with a cynical smile. 'But I must go now. *Salaam*, brother; I have more *work* to do, and have no time for idle talk. You had better study for your examination, my friend, and leave mystic poetry and hazy politics to others.'

CHAPTER V.

A WEDDING PROCESSION.

THAT a brass band playing foreign airs adds vastly to the dignity of any and every social function is not to be doubted in India. So whether it be a wedding or a funeral, whether an occasion for rejoicing or of mourning, European music must, if means permit, give noisy importance to the event.

This time a band of the approved sort was engaged to accompany a wedding-party, a motley procession, which was slowly wending its way to the main entrance of Mozung, and the loud discordant wind instruments, with the no less noisy drums, playing in gasps 'Auld lang Syne,' with very Indian variations, made the air throb again.

It was a peculiar sight, this procession, as it went along in the warm summer morning towards the village of Mozung. In advance of, but unconnected with, the wedding-party, was a string of three ungainly camels slouching along under their burdens near the mosque at the corner of the main thoroughfare. On the side of the road, a little way beyond the bridge and not far from the camels, a couple of rickety *ekkas* were standing for hire. In the moving

crowd which we have called the procession the men's jaunty turbans caught and threw back the sunshine bravely in vivid patches of colour and with kaleidoscopic effect. In the gay disorder there were several conspicuous objects. Close behind the band, with their shining, if somewhat ancient, brass instruments, came the bridegroom on horseback, dressed in yellow garments, wearing a head-dress of red cloth with gold edging, and a veil of tiny flowers over his face. A small boy was seated behind him. This bridegroom from the border country, a fine young fellow who had backed many a wild colt in his native place, was as brave and proficient a horseman as one could wish to find, and even his veil of flowers could not conceal the manly beauty of Hakim Ali's handsome brown face and the light of his hawk-like eyes.

Following him came a small *doolee* (litter), carried by a couple of men, with its brick-red screens closely drawn. In it sat the little bride, Lateefun, jealously concealed from view, but doing her very best to see, from between the flapping *purdahs*, the noisy, bustling world round about her. The girl's face was slightly flushed, her veil had slipped off her head owing to the jolting of the *doolee*, and the red silk bodice she wore could only partially conceal her excitement.

It would be difficult to analyze the little maiden's feelings on this very important occasion of her life; but nervous anxiety—for she did not know her bridegroom at all—coloured her sentiments very largely, and mingled with affectionate regrets at the thought

that she would soon be obliged to leave her beloved mother and the dear friends of her childhood.

There was some compensation for these depressing emotions in the possession of the fine things in which she was attired, and certainly the gold bracelets on her wrists had been the envy of all her girl friends who had seen them.

Behind the *doolee* was carried a brand new bed, with its legs handsomely lacquered in red, yellow and blue, and strung with broad white cotton tape, as comfortable to lie upon as a woven-wire mattress. This was the bridal bed. Amongst the other presents displayed on this public occasion was a highly-ornamental chair, also of lacquered wood, garlanded with fresh flowers, and a spinning-wheel to match —both useful household articles—carried, perhaps, as symbols of duties the young wife would be expected to perform in her new home. There was also a huge yet neat bundle of wedding-garments on the head of a strong porter, while another carried a large basket in which the brass plates and the gold and silver ornaments were stored. These were all the simple requisites of an Indian home—a bed, a stool, a spinning-wheel, clothes, personal ornaments, and brass plates. What more could anyone desire?

Abdulla and Muhammad, both on foot, brought up the rear of the procession, the former with his arm in a sling, and by no means very brisk or good-natured. He had on his head a clean white turban, from the centre of which the top of a conical red cap projected, but his attire imitated, to some extent, European fashions. When he had come to Lahore

from his native village he presented a very different appearance. At that time his trousers fitted tightly over his legs and bagged enormously at the waist. These had now been replaced by European pantaloons of the usual cut. The coloured leather shoes, curved up at the toes, which formerly covered his stockingless feet, had given place to black shiny patent-leather ones of European pattern. A printed calico shirt, with plaited front and long turn-down collar and silver studs, did duty for the long collarless and sleeveless *kurta* of earlier times. Over all he wore a garment of light-blue material, which was a sort of compromise between a *chapkan* and a frock-coat, with a side pocket, out of which peeped a red and yellow cotton handkerchief. It is true that the tail of Abdulla's shirt had not yet been tucked into his trousers, and a necktie had not yet been adopted. But, nevertheless, it was apparent that the lad wished to imitate European modes of dress, and was gradually undergoing the desired transformation.

Any way, Abdulla, bringing up the rear of the bridal procession, was not very happy, though so smartly got up.

'This is not a very grand *tamasha*,' he grumbled sulkily. 'Amir Khan's wedding was far better. It is so hot and dusty, too, to-day.'

'When is Lateefun to go to Peshawar?' asked his brother mischievously.

'I don't know,' said Abdulla. 'It does not concern *you*. Walk along, and don't knock up against my arm.'

Everyone that could do so came out to have a look at the procession. Moradun watched the *doolee* and its followers with great pleasure from the window of a house in the main street; for she felt, with much satisfaction, that Lateefun would now be for ever beyond Mahir's reach, and she was not sorry that the bride would soon have to go away to so distant a place as Peshawar.

'The farther the better, the farther the better,' said Moradun to herself, as these thoughts passed through her mind and brought smiles to her lips.

Mahir himself had too urgent business elsewhere to be able to take part in these gay doings at Mozung.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ANGEL CAME.

THE heat of which Abdulla complained when taking part in the wedding procession was becoming more and more unbearable. Day by day the sun grew more intense; day by day the dust increased and the glare became more cruel.

At last there came a night of dismal, almost unimaginable, misery. On the flat house-tops which form the most convenient dormitories in hot climates, and in the narrow, unventilated lanes of the crowded village, the restless sleepers tossed uncomfortably on their cots, snatching what sleep they could in the stifling atmosphere of the still night.

All trace of the heavens was lost in a dust haze which filled the air. Men, women, and children alike shared the discomfort. Many a mat-fan was in requisition to set the breathless air in motion; but after the toils of a long day and the exhaustion caused by the fierce heat, most of the people lay about in a sort of lethargic torpor. Many had been fasting all day, for, by the will of Allah, this year the strict fast of Ramazan had fallen in the summertime. It had commenced two days before, and its

observance pressed very heavily upon the faithful, who would on no account shirk in the least degree this all-important duty, remembering that the Prophet has said of fasting that it is 'the gate of religion,' and that 'the odour of the mouth of him that fasteth is more grateful to God than that of musk.'

About midnight a hot wind, far hotter than the air around them, stole silently over the sleepers, as if proceeding from the open door of a mighty furnace. Floating over the high houses, flowing sluggishly through the narrow, crooked alleys, and percolating, as it were, through the small, barred windows of Mozung, came this dreadful blast. As it reached them several persons rose to their feet, apprehending a fire, and began to look about for the cause of the heat which seemed to scorch their bare bodies. Words were exchanged from housetop to housetop, and amidst the hot, oppressive atmosphere loud were the ejaculatory cries to Allah for protection.

The suffocating wind passed over Mozung, stealing away as mysteriously as it came, and the people once more courted such sleep as it was possible to get. Stillness and dust-haze settled again over the village; but the doomed ones were roughly roused from their slumbers by a hand which never fails to be felt, a voice which never fails to be heard, for it is the hand and voice of that grimmest of all destroyers, the Asiatic cholera.

Ere day broke over the fevered sleep of Mozung, ere the *nagâra* was sounded from the mosques and shrines, to wake the faithful for such refreshment as they might take before the earliest approaches of the

dawn imposed the rigorous fast of Ramazan, twelve souls amongst them had been hastily summoned away.

Through the day rumours of sickness and fatalities were whispered about with bated breath, and a numbing terror seemed to seize on old and young alike. Wearily for everyone did the long, sultry day of summer drag to a close, but most wearily for the fasting Muslims, whose throats were parched with fear as well as with thirst. As night approached the terror seemed greater and more oppressive.

From the little mosque at the corner of the lane, the wonderful voice of the *mulla*, clear, sonorous, far-reaching, called upon Allah to mercifully stay the Destroyer's hand. From twenty other mosques of the village, from every shrine, and from every house-top, the cry to Allah was echoed and re-echoed. For full three hours, through the sultry air of the moonless night, arose the appeal to Heaven, and the whole village seemed to join as one family in the earnest prayer for help.

In Lateefun's home there was deep anxiety. The child, who had not yet joined her husband finally, lay on her low bed, unconscious of the world around her, not in peaceful slumber, but in almost pulseless coma, her large eyes half open, and her beautiful features pinched and pallid. The room was dimly lighted by two *chiraghs*,* whose smoky flames threw on the walls of the chamber grotesque shadows of

* The *chiragh* is a terra-cotta lamp somewhat saucer-shaped, with a lip or spout at one point. It is fed with oil, in which lies a cotton wick, one end of which protrudes a little beyond the spout.

Lateefun's mother and of a couple of women who were present there, kindly helping her in this time of great trouble.

'Is the *hakeem* (physician) coming?' asked the mother with eagerness, as Abdulla presented himself at the door of the sickroom, and stealthily approached the prostrate figure.

'Will not the *hakeem* come to see the child? Has he too forsaken us?'

'He was called away last evening to Pind, and has not yet returned,' was the reply.

'And your friend Sarfaraz?'

'He went home on urgent business a week ago,' said Abdulla, with evident effort.

'Allah's will be done!' groaned the disconsolate mother. '*He* alone can help us now.'

'Sher Afghan sends his *salaams*,' said Abdulla hesitatingly. 'He is in great trouble also.'

'Great God! has *it* visited his house, too?'

The boy silently nodded his head.

'Alas! alas! why has Allah forsaken us? Why has He cast us off?'

Abdulla, choking with emotion, shyly shuffled out of the room, for he knew full well that he had no right to be there; but he could not, for the life of him, have stayed his feet at the threshold.

Hour after hour crept slowly on with leaden feet, while the child lay cold and unconscious. A long silence—the silence of absolute despair—fell upon the watchers in the sickroom, till broken by the loud drums in the mosque warning the fasting Muslims of the approaching dawn.

'Look here, mother,' said a woman sitting near the bed. 'Do as I tell you. Everything is, no doubt, in the hands of God; yet we give medicine to the sick, and the wise do other things also. The *nagâra* is being sounded, day approaches. You remember what the Hindu woman told us?'

'Yes, I remember,' replied the *Moglâni*; 'but it has not been the custom amongst us to do such things.'

A long pause followed. Then the *Moglâni* rose, and, placing her ear close to Lateefun's icy mouth, listened with strained attention. There was a mental conflict going on within her. At length her scruples were overcome; the child should have her chance. Standing upright, she said 'May Allah forgive and help me!' and with these words she unloosed her long white hair and shook the flowing tresses down her back. For a moment she stood as if still in doubt, but, casting her eyes on the unconscious child, her hesitation vanished. She went down on her knees and bowed her aged head till her forehead touched the floor. Her white hair fell over her bowed face, and she swept the ground with it from the bedside of the sufferer to the door, not only of the room but of the house. Again and again did she bow her venerable and still beautiful head humbly to the floor, and sweep a clean path to her door for the exit of the demon of disease who had taken possession of her darling; at length, worn out by anxiety, excitement, and the unwonted effort, she sat down in silence on a low stool at the sufferer's bedside, as the gray light of the early dawn stole in the

stillness through the barred window of the little room.

'What news, Abdulla? What news of Sher Afghan's family?' asked the ancient maid-servant, who met him as he was coming into the house at daybreak.

'Why ask? Things are very bad with them—very bad indeed. I hardly dare communicate the dreadful news. Sher Afghan's son and daughter are both dead, and the old man himself is very ill.'

Begum, horrified by these evil tidings, threw up her skinny arms and wailed aloud:

'Alas! alas for the house of our master! Alas! alas for my poor Lateefun! widowed already—widowed before she is a wife!'

'Hush, hush, mother!' said the lad, shaking the old woman vigorously by the arm. 'Hush, for God's sake, if you don't want to kill her with your howling!'

'Ah! poor Lateefun,' moaned the old woman, as she sat down on a low stool, holding her head in her hands. 'Ah! poor Lateefun! And brave, handsome Hakam Ali is gone, who so generously gave me five rupees last Friday. Here they are,' taking out a dirty purse from her waist and shedding bitter tears over it. 'And Belatun is dead, too—pretty Belatun! and she seventeen years of age, and kept unmarried so long that a suitable match for her might be found, and now that all has been arranged, Allah sends for her. *Hai! hai!*' ('Alas! alas!')

'Don't make a noise—don't make a noise!' said Abdulla impatiently, clutching her arm. 'The

hakeem has returned from Pind, and will be here very soon. I left word at his house that he was wanted here most urgently.'

'Why did he not come long ago?'

Before he could reply, Lateefun's mother called out:

'Begum, what are you doing talking there when I want your help?'

'I am coming! But, *Bibi sahib*, there is dreadful news: the——'

'Hush!' said the lad, seizing her roughly by the wrist. 'Not a word of Sher Afghan's family, or you will kill Lateefun. Now, take care! You will kill Lateefun, I tell you, if you don't hold your tongue.'

An hour went by, but the *hakeem* did not come. Impatient at his delay, Abdulla walked down the lane to look for him, with painful anxiety visible in every movement of his nervous frame. Nor were his despondency and terror relieved by finding, as he went along, that Death had during the night been very busy in the village.

On the roadside, stretched upon a wretched bed, lay some poor fellow covered with a white cloth. Four sad women, whose glass bangles, broken in token of mourning, strewed the ground with coloured fragments, and two or three little children with scared faces formed a narrow circle near the cot. The women were wailing in the plaintive way which is the style of lamentation throughout the East; the children sat with bowed heads and imitated the elders. One of the women somewhat destroyed the symmetry of the circle as she pulled

at the long tube of her hookah. Behind her, on a stool, sat a young man lost in dismal thought.

In reply to an inquiring look from Abdulla:

'It is Raghu,' said the woman, removing the hookah from her lips—'Raghu Bunneeah. The men have gone to arrange for the firewood.'

The mourners redoubled their lamentations, and Abdulla hurried down the lane, their ululations ringing in his ears, mingled with the drunken ribaldry of some low-caste fellows whom terror of the pestilence had driven into unrestrained license. Presently he had to stand aside to let a funeral procession pass—another Hindu being carried away to be disposed of on the funeral pyre.

Although the appalling character of the visitation rested like a cloud upon the hearts of the people, respect for the dead was not forgotten, and the funeral passed along with lugubrious pomp, preceded by a band of noisy musical instruments. The corpse on the *charpoy* was that of a woman, for it had a light bamboo framework over it, covered with a red-and-white cotton cloth, which decorously prevented the outlines of her person being seen. A few men, singing loudly and clanging their cymbals, followed the band; then came the corpse on its bed. About twenty women brought up the rear, some of them sprinkling rose-water, now and then, upon the body.

Abdulla, completely unnerved, hastened off to the *hakeem's* house to find out why he did not come. At the physician's door his inquiry was answered by a woman, who said:

'The *hakeem* is not well, and cannot attend to you.'

'Give him this,' said the lad, taking a gold ring of ancient pattern from his finger, the only thing of any value he possessed in the world. 'Give him this, and implore him, for the love of God, to come quickly.'

Tears filled the woman's eyes.

'Son,' she said, 'keep your ring. The *hakeem* is very ill. Only the Great Physician of all can cure him. Go, my son, and ask for other help.'

Returning by the way of his own little home, Abdulla entered the house, and emerging again in a few minutes with something carefully wrapped up in a cloth cover, proceeded to his aunt's house. Arrived there, he dared not ask about Lateefun's condition, but loitered at the door. An acquaintance happening to pass by, he pointed to his broken arm, and asked assistance to suspend his parcel beneath the arch of the entrance-doorway of the house. The friend readily consented to help Abdulla, and in a few minutes he drove three or four tacks, which Abdulla gave him, into the masonry, using as a hammer a piece of brick which he had picked up outside. To the tacks he suspended the parcel. The gentle tapping had attracted the attention of old Begum, who came out to see what it was due to.

'Where, Abdulla, is the *hakeem?* We have been waiting and watching for him. And what are you doing there? What are you about? What is this?' raising her hand towards the suspended parcel.

'Don't touch it, mother,' said the boy earnestly;

'it contains the blessed Koran which belonged to my father. May Heaven preserve us! The *hakeem* himself is very ill!'

But before he could prevent her, Begum had not only touched the suspended parcel but had actually removed it.

'This is no place, at the *door* of the house, for the sacred book,' and, carrying it reverently in both her hands, she took it upstairs and placed it on a low stool at the head of Lateefun's cot.

She had hardly done so when Lateefun's eyes opened languidly.

'Mother,' she said, in a faint, almost inaudible, voice—'Mother, is Abdulla's arm still broken?'

Neighbours passed in and passed out of the house, for the natural kindness of the people, aided by their deep-seated fatalism, triumphed over the terror of even a visitation like that from which the village was suffering.

But Abdulla dared not ask for any information, though his ears drank in every word that was uttered by the women as they hurried past him to attend to their own homes and their domestic duties.

At last a young woman passing by said, in a low and sympathetic voice:

'Do not fear, she will live.'

The boy started, but only replied with '*Sobhân Allah!*' ('Praise be to God!'), as Moradun, for it was she who had spoken, walked quickly away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW MOON.

WITH what longing eyes do the Muslims peer into the western horizon for a glimpse of the silver thread of the moon of *Eed*, which is to end their trying fast of thirty days. For if the moon be not seen on the expected day, the faithful must bear the burden of their painful abstinence for at least one tedious day longer, and even *one* additional day is no little matter to men already spent with thirst and hunger.

In all positions of advantage groups of persons were standing about scanning the sky, still yellow with the sunset, for the expected and much-wished-for new moon.

Presently the drums beat loudly in the mosques of the village to announce the close of day, and to accord permission to the fasters to refresh their exhausted bodies; but first Allah must be worshipped, and people hastened into the open courts of the mosques, where the priests repeated in loud tones the prayers for the occasion, and led the congregation.

When, after worship, they came out of the

mosques, many turned their eyes wistfully towards the still glowing west, and words like the following might have been heard on all sides:

'There is the moon! don't you see it? There, there, above that little cloud!' 'To the right of that tree—exactly like a silver thread.' 'Praise be to Allah, who has shown us the blessed moon of *Eed*.'

As new comers joined the groups, to get a glimpse of the auspicious moon—the faintest of crescents in the sky—a confused roar of mingled voices rose from the village, and exploding bombs from various parts of the neighbourhood informed the lingerers that the moon had been seen by others also, and that the fast of Ramazan was indeed over. Friends and neighbours exchanged cordial salutations. The groups dispersed quickly to their homes and melted into the narrow streets and alleys of Mozung.

At her lattice, pale and wan from her recent terrible illness, sat the child-widow of fourteen, on a low stool with a high back. What were her thoughts?

The handsome Hakam Ali, to whom she had been married, but whom she had never known, was dead, and the child felt a natural regret at her bereavement. The dead youth, who for years had been her destined husband, had for months past filled an important place in her thoughts, blended with sweet dreams of golden ornaments and pretty clothes. Previous to her wedding childish apprehension, or girlish curiosity, more often youthful hope, had coloured her view of the future.

Love had had no part in her feelings. How could it, when she was unacquainted with her bridegroom? But there had been no revolt, no opposition even, in her heart. It was all right. She would be married; just as, in due course, she would be a mother, and in time grow old. It was all in the course of Nature. But the particular future she had feared, or had looked forward to with hopeful anticipation, was now closed for ever, and the girl, thrown, as it were, off all her reckonings, sat dreaming listlessly at the window. On a cushion near her lay a large book. It was the Koran which had been hung up over her door by Abdulla when there was little hope of her recovery; for *Sufi* though he was, he was an Indian still. She had been taught to read its sacred pages, but the meaning of the Arabic words she could only get at with great difficulty, if at all. The sacred volume of her faith, however, secured but little of her attention, which was rather divided between the gold *kurra* on her wrist and a book, bound in brown leather, which she was handling with great curiosity. It had been tied up with the Koran which Abdulla had suspended near the door and Begum had placed at the head of the bed. Lateefun suspected that it was some important work of English magic which he had, somehow, got hold of. And, as she handled, upside down, the compact volume with its double columns of unknown words, she felt that, in some mysterious way, her fate was bound up with it.

Had this strange book anything to do with her recovery, which many of her friends considered

little less than miraculous? Who could tell? Surely clever Abdulla, who had placed it along with the Koran, must have known its value as a talisman, at any rate in certain desperate cases.

A deep impression had been made on the girl's mind by the events of the past few weeks, forcing it into a sort of unnatural maturity. Lateefun had always been an unusually bright and careless child; but the recent circumstances of her life had suddenly widened her horizon and sobered her thoughts. She had herself been brought face to face with death. She had been to the house of her husband, if only to return to her mother; yet that meant much. She had been a principal party in a procession which, in her eyes, was grand and imposing. Friends had made much of her. She had been arrayed in silks and jewels. Now she was a *widow;* not without a feeling of abasement at the thought that her destiny had been so luckless, and that she, perhaps, had brought misfortune and disaster to the honourable house of Sher Afghan.

Pensively she turned the brown-leather volume over and over in her delicate hands in silent reverie. Her long hair, which had just been combed out, fell in heavy masses down her back. Her face was pale; her glorious dark eyes seemed unnaturally large below their luxuriant lashes; her graceful form, hardly concealed by her muslin shift, seemed chiselled in ivory.

'Mother!' called the girl.

'Yes, beloved,' was the reply, and immediately the *Moglâni* came into the room.

'I want to learn English. I wish to read this book of magic,' said Lateefun.

'What a strange notion, my child! No woman in our family has known English or learnt more than was needful to read the sacred volume of our faith.'

Lateefun held the strange book tightly in her grasp, as if to force its secrets out of it, and her eyes seemed peering beyond the bars of the open window into the pure heaven above for some revelation of the things that were to come.

The new moon, a mere line of silver, arrested her attention, but, near it, projected against the sky, she noticed the elegant minarets of the mosque of Sardar Khan. To her too keenly impressionable mind the fate of that inauspicious building seemed an emblem of her own destiny which the cheering vision of the moon of *Eed* could not dispel. A cold shiver ran through her as she recalled to mind that the mosque known as the 'Eedgah' had been brought almost to completion, and was about to be used for public worship, when the unfortunate architect, falling from the tower, met an untimely end; that by this accident the handsome building had acquired an evil reputation, had been completely neglected, and was hastening to decay.

Her morbid feelings quite overcame her, and she closed her fingers convulsively over the brown volume in her hand, as if clutching it for support and comfort.

CHAPTER VIII.

ATONEMENT.

THOUGH in the village the death-roll had been appalling, the dread Destroyer's hand was not yet stayed.

A public and united appeal to God's mercy seemed imperatively called for. The principal *mulla*, addressing the congregation from the steps of the *mimber* (pulpit) in the mosque one Friday afternoon, had said:

'Shall we not, my children in adversity, offer an atonement to Allah for our sins? since, surely, it is our grievous iniquities that are thus being visited with such terrible marks of the Almighty's displeasure.'

With an ever-present consciousness of Divine interposition in the affairs of mortals, the Muslim villagers, scared by the plague which had decimated their homes, heartily responded to the *mulla's* suggestion.

An atonement meant a sacrifice of some sort, and a victim to bear the sins of the multitude. To provide this a basket was placed near the door of Nizam Shah's mosque, and in it rupees, and smaller silver coins, copper pice, and even cowrie-shells

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were quickly collected, all classes contributing willingly to the fund. And, though this was essentially a Mussulman movement, Hindus also put in their oblations, for it was no time for indulging religious animosities when all were suffering from so severe a visitation, and no one could tell for whom the morrow's sun would rise. So, by small but quick accretions, the little heap of coins and shells grew and grew, till at last there was sufficient money in the basket to carry out the *mulla's* suggestion, and a buffalo without blemish was duly purchased with it. Adorned with flowers, the big ungainly animal, its black skin well oiled and almost shining, was, at an appointed hour, led down by a mixed party of the inhabitants of Mozung to the side of the river Ravi, near the bridge of boats, where, by the flowing water, under shelter of a few trees, they prepared, in huge copper caldrons, over brisk wood fires, a simple feast of rice and *dal* (lentils). By the time they had finished their cooking, which was enlivened by drums, the sun was sinking beyond the river, and the witchery of evening shadows was gliding with melancholy sweetness over the tranquil scene. The sky was crimson, and so was the smooth, broad river, fringed with tall white-plumed reeds. Behind was a belt of forest, and westward, across the Ravi, rose the lofty minarets of the mausoleum of a Mogul emperor. Oxen and donkeys, worn out with their day's labour, shuffled clumsily over the bridge of boats, which lay in a huge loop upon the water, between the opposite banks of the river. A *piercing* whistle, and a puff of black smoke near by

Shahdera, announced the approach of a railway train. Presently, shrieking and panting, it passed at some distance away, high above the water, over an iron-girder bridge, and quickly disappeared from sight.

A few Europeans had come from Lahore, and, standing on the bridge of boats, to catch, if possible, a breath of cool air off the river, watched with indifference the proceedings of the people from Mozung, deeming them part of some idolatrous *pujah* or other. They were much more interested in a handsome, showy, brazen-faced woman who, with her gauzy veil slipping off her well-shaped head, was on the bridge having a very good time with two or three ardent admirers, to one of whom, bolder than the others, she now and then coquettishly administered a gentle back-handed slap in the face.

After sundown two men stood by the head of the bridge, inviting such passers-by as would partake of the simple fare to come and do so, for, of course, none of the inhabitants of afflicted Mozung could think of eating of the food which they had themselves provided. The two men at the bridge head were Mahir Din and Abdulla: the one aroused from his selfish worldliness, the other from his philosophical mysticism, to seek together the protecting hand of Allah the Most Merciful.

After the simple repast was finished, the buffalo, garlanded with flowers, and daubed over with paint and oil, was led across the bridge, and set free amongst the clumps of elegant date-palms by the river side. Under a sky which was now like

burnished copper the inhabitants of Mozung began their long walk homewards, bare-footed as they had come, in token of humiliation. The giddy wanton who had been coquetting on the bridge mounted a shabby dogcart, gathered up the reins, and drove through the straggling crowd, which she scattered right and left of her, to the amusement of the men, and the unconcealed annoyance of the women.

Although the gathering by the river-side had been for a serious and solemn purpose, the assembly soon recovered its everyday cheerfulness on the way home.

By the time the returning party was crossing the substantial bridge over what is known as the Little Ravi, it had become quite chatty and sociable. The evening was fine, the still waters of the lake reflected, as if in a mirror, the bridge, the trees, the tall elegant reeds which fringed its banks, and a solitary star which shone brilliantly in the sky. Somewhat in advance, and to the left, stood the walled city, with its lofty houses; the bastioned fort, and the marble domes of the stately mosque of Aurangzeb high in the air.

In the crowd upon the bridge was Moradun, looking her best, and, as always, spotlessly clean, her superb figure draped elegantly in a simple white *saree* with a yellow border. On the narrow bridgeway she got jostled, perhaps not unintentionally, towards Mahir Din, and, wishing to engage him in conversation, she said:

'I have been to see the *Mogláni's* daughter; she is well now.'

'Yes; is she quite well now? Tell me all about her. Is she as beautiful as ever?'

His eagerness nettled Moradun, and she quickly added:

'Yes, she is quite well now, and wishes to become a *Valaiti mem-sahib*' (an English lady).

'*Valaiti mem-sahib!* What foolishness is this?' And he laughed in her face.

'Foolishness it truly is, but hers, not mine,' said Moradun testily.

'Nonsense!' was the contemptuous reply.

'Is it indeed nonsense when Abdulla is with her every day teaching her English?'

'That's a lie!' said Mahir roughly.

'It is no lie! but why should *you* be so angry about it? *You* have nothing to do with her.'

'Nor with *you*,' responded Mahir.

And he moved away, leaving poor Moradun very much troubled indeed.

She had certainly wished to set him against Lateefun, fearing that his admiration of the girl might, now that she was free again, take an active form. But she had not expected such an explosion of temper.

However, she found consolation in the reflection that Mahir, stung by jealousy at what she had told him, would now probably harbour resentful feelings against Lateefun, and, perhaps, put her out of his mind.

She went along with the crowd, nursing these comforting thoughts, and wondering whether Mahir, for whom she had deserted the gods of her

fathers, would ever be to her more than he then was.

'How kind he used to be formerly,' said the girl to herself, 'and how liberal; how ready with promises of marriage, till he had his way! Now he seems disposed to repudiate me entirely; but my woman's love is his still—he knows that too well, and, in his pride, he holds it of little account.'

Brooding sadly over the recent change in Mahir's behaviour and feelings towards her, but still fondling the idea that her revelation might wean him from thoughts of Lateefun, Moradun walked the rest of the long way to Mozung in moody silence.

CHAPTER IX.

RAIN FROM HEAVEN.

GRADUALLY the plague which had afflicted the village was stayed, but another trouble not less dreadful was threatening the land—famine—for the much-needed rain still held off, the dust flew about in blinding clouds from the parched ground and filled the hot air. The sky was like brass. Fodder for the cattle had become scarce, and the corn-merchants had raised the prices of the necessaries of life, till the poor were seriously pinched for food. Already the large number who, in ordinary times, live without humiliation upon the willing and personally dispensed charity of their neighbours were being put to sad straits. Already these needy hundreds were driven to more obtrusive modes of mendicancy than was habitual to them, and already the unmistakable signs of starvation were beginning to be seen in the shrunken persons of the more aged poor.

In the trouble that was upon them, and in view of the still greater trouble looming in the near future, men of every creed felt the need of help from God.

The Hindus had, in accordance with their estab-

lished usages, arranged for elaborate services of song being performed at the *Baoli-sahib* in the city, just behind the Sonehri Musjid, and within sight of its lofty, gilded domes. These choral services were intended to propitiate their gods for rain, and were carried out for eleven consecutive days. There were no women present at the gatherings, but that song-bird, Moradun, had heard of these meetings of meister-singers, and, Hindu as she was at heart though professing Islam, was irresistibly attracted to the *Baoli-sahib* one afternoon to find out what was going on there.

She stood in the doorway taking in the scene. In the open space within the arched gateway of the place there were two parties of *bhuggats* (elders), each party seated on a carpet so as to form a perfect rectangle, one party on the right, the other on the left of the entrance doorway. The two parties were quite distinct from each other, and, as Moradun soon discovered, performed alternately. In the centre of each rectangle stood a *jodh*, or lamp, made out of wheat-flour kneaded up with water and fed with clarified butter. It was kept burning brightly in the open-air on a low stool smothered in a profusion of loose flowers and garlands of flowers. The *bhuggats* ranged about it sang not prayers for rain, as might have been expected, but episodes from that famous Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, possibly as a pleasant entertainment for the gods. A few men had drums, the rest had cymbals. They sang with great earnestness and gusto, and in perfect unison, under the guidance of an aged and very handsome

conductor, who seemed enraptured with the performance. He swayed his body about ecstatically, turning his gaze sometimes towards the singers, sometimes heavenwards, as if looking for some favourable signs in the sky above.

Moradun was almost as much affected by the singing as the aged conductor himself, and could with difficulty refrain from joining in the music.

Looking up into the sky, she noticed with reverential awe that clouds were drifting overhead, a cheering promise of coming rain.

Ajeet Singh, the Sikh carpenter, who had been watching her for some time, stole up to her and said:

'I am glad to see you here, Sammuria' (addressing Moradun by her Hindu name). 'This is how your forefathers worshipped their gods, and thus should you do also. Return to us, Sammuria—it is not too late.'

'Nay, *mistree-je*, it is quite impossible now. What Hindu would ever eat with me again, or even receive a hookah from my hand? It is quite impossible.'

And, smiling brightly, she made an attempt to move away.

He let her pass, but kept alongside, saying, as he walked along:

'By no means impossible, if only you are willing. You know there is one door open for your return. Drink the *pauhl*, and become a Sikh. My house is yours; but perhaps you have already married that detestable horse-racer.'

Moradun made no reply.

'I want to learn English. I wish to read this book of magic,' said Lateefun.

'What a strange notion, my child! No woman in our family has known English or learnt more than was needful to read the sacred volume of our faith.'

Lateefun held the strange book tightly in her grasp, as if to force its secrets out of it, and her eyes seemed peering beyond the bars of the open window into the pure heaven above for some revelation of the things that were to come.

The new moon, a mere line of silver, arrested her attention, but, near it, projected against the sky, she noticed the elegant minarets of the mosque of Sardar Khan. To her too keenly impressionable mind the fate of that inauspicious building seemed an emblem of her own destiny which the cheering vision of the moon of *Eed* could not dispel. A cold shiver ran through her as she recalled to mind that the mosque known as the 'Eedgah' had been brought almost to completion, and was about to be used for public worship, when the unfortunate architect, falling from the tower, met an untimely end; that by this accident the handsome building had acquired an evil reputation, had been completely neglected, and was hastening to decay.

Her morbid feelings quite overcame her, and she closed her fingers convulsively over the brown volume in her hand, as if clutching it for support and comfort.

wants,' said the woman. 'He is a religious man, a *pir;* but there are people who think that he has suffered a great wrong at the hands of somebody, and that he is calling upon Allah to avenge him. He comes to this place every day, and cries to Allah like that for at least three hours without stopping!'

'What wrong has he suffered?' asked Moradun.

'I don't know; but people say that during the great pestilence he lost his son and daughter.'

'But surely that was by the will of God Himself,' said Moradun.

'Aye, surely; but it is common talk in the bazaar —God knows if it is true—that because *that* disease came into his house it was ransacked by the police, and when Pir-ji was very ill all his property disappeared.'

'Who took it?' inquired Moradun, much concerned about Pir-ji's loss.

'Why ask?' was the reply; 'but how should I know? Some say that there was lots of money in the house, and that Pir-ji fully intended to go to Mecca after his son's marriage, and become a *Haji.*'

'Oh! and wear a green *pugree* (turban) afterwards?'

'Yes, and acquire a great store of merit for the heavenward pilgrimage.'

'And now he can't go?' queried Moradun.

'How can he when his money has disappeared?'

'And it is that disappointment which has filled his heart with bitterness?'

'Yes, even so,' was the reply.

'And Allah will hear him?'

'Why not?'

Thus did the two women converse about Pir-ji, whose loud tones, and the earnest, rapt expression on his upturned face, evidently affected and impressed a great many people, who stood from time to time to listen respectfully to his vigorous pleading; and Moradun, under the spell of his voice, could not tear herself away from the spot till, at the appointed hour of prayer, he suddenly ceased his persistent appeal to God, and, passing near her, entered the court of the great mosque. Moradun then rose, and bent her wandering steps towards a spot outside the city walls where some hundreds of pious Muslims had assembled, in a sort of camp upon the open plain, to supplicate Allah for rain, many of them vowing they would not return home till He had vouchsafed a favourable answer to their prayers.

Morning and evening the people had prayed together that the land might be blessed with rain, and daily did the more prosperous amongst them liberally feed the indigent; but the dust still filled the air, and what remained of vegetation drooped and died. This was the fourth day of their supplication, and as the multitude was raising a united prayer to heaven in a stifling atmosphere, wherein not even the long-stalked leaves of the *peepul*-tree stirred, a lurid light overspread the sky, and in the western horizon appeared what looked like a solid wall of cloud, with a vertical face extending from the ground upwards. It approached rapidly and majestically, growing

momentarily higher, broader, and more sombre, more menacing, as it came on and on with gloomy irresistible power. In an incredibly short time the sun was completely obscured by it, and the entire sky became darkened.

The birds, alarmed, uttered plaintive cries as they flew about or soared aloft on wavering wing.

'*Andhi! andhi!*' ('Storm! storm!') noisily shouted the excited people, as they hurriedly collected their belongings together in a scene of the utmost confusion.

Moradun was there by this time, right in the heart of the camp, enjoying the excitement of the moment, laughing merrily, and giving active help to those around her.

In three or four minutes the trees, which had been standing in lifeless stillness, began to toss their long arms about in frenzied warfare with the blustering wind. A few seconds afterwards the multitude, the trees, the houses, and the country around, were suddenly enveloped in a furious North-Indian dust-storm, which in less than a minute so completely extinguished the light of day that a darkness more intense than that of the blackest night prevailed over the scene. The people wrapped their faces in their sheets to protect themselves from the all-pervading dust, and, crouching huddled together on the open plain, waited, with Oriental patience and resignation, for what was to come. Children in terror clung to their parents, and the astonished cattle and horses, sniffing the thick air with distended nostrils, resigned themselves to the inevitable, as the wind whistled through the creaking

trees, and the dust almost suffocated man and beast. Amongst the hundreds on the ground was old Begum, to whom Mahir Din was particularly helpful. Holding her by the hand, he said:

'Sit down here, mother. Keep near me, it will soon be over;' and the feeble old woman was only too glad to have his protection and do as he wished.

For several minutes the storm raged with great fury, and gradually the air became cooler. Big drops of rain fell through the red dust, marking the clothes of the assembled people with patches of rusty colour. As the lower atmosphere gradually cleared, dark, ragged clouds were seen scudding overhead, and amidst the cloud-rack vivid lightnings sputtered and played in the leaden sky. A refreshing downpour of rain followed. It fell with a hissing sound, and, in no time, covered the ground with water, on whose surface large bubbles, formed by the great raindrops, rushed along with the new-made stream.

With thankfulness to Allah the people returned to their homes, in the delightful shower of rain from which no one, man, woman or child, desired protection. They literally revelled in the coolness of the falling rain, and, laughing and shouting, enveloped in their dripping, clinging garments, splashed merrily along the streets, now running ankle deep with muddy water.

In the homeward rush, Mahir Din, always wide awake and mindful of his opportunities, took special charge of old Begum, from whose garrulity he hoped to hear something about Lateefun. Moradun was

not far behind them, in the company of some girl friends.

'What a very sad house yours must be, Begum,' said Mahir, 'now that your young mistress is left a widow. A new *bundobast* (arrangement) will have to be made some day, I suppose, eh?'

'Yes, of course. At present her only thought is to learn—but—I had better not talk.'

'Why not, mother? I am an old friend, you know. Take care, or you will fall; your shoes are torn. This will buy you a new pair,' slipping a rupee into her hand.

Moradun saw what Mahir had done, and it stung her to the quick, for she felt this generosity must have something to do with Lateefun, and she was also annoyed by a coarse jesting allusion made by one of her companions to Mahir's partiality for old Begum.

'Ah, *salaam*, Mahir Din, you are like your father used to be: free with his money and fond of the women.'

'I have heard you were a very good-looking girl in his days,' laughed Mahir. And old Begum, highly flattered, croaked with pleasure, while her deeply wrinkled face contorted itself into the mockery of a broad smile. 'Now, Begum, say who is teaching Lateefun English?'

The question put in this abrupt way made the old woman literally jump, and she answered tremulously:

'Don't ask me—don't ask me; I know nothing. I have promised—I have sworn not to speak about it.'

'Oh! ho! so you won't tell me; but I know. Abdulla, that pious *Sufi*, is the sly fox—eh? Does he teach her *every* day?'

'Who said anything about Abdulla?' asked Begum, quite terrified.

'*I* did, and you can't deny what I have said,' was the reply.

Begum made no answer, and the two walked on side by side, Mahir Din, now fully satisfied that Moradun had not lied, with a thoughtful and somewhat sinister expression on his face.

While the foregoing colloquy was going on, Moradun, much perturbed by Mahir's attention to old Begum, had stumbled over a brick, and, losing her footing on the slippery road, would have fallen to the ground if Ajeet Singh, returning from the city, had not caught her by the arm in a powerful grasp.

'This is a good omen, Sammuria,' said the *mistree* (carpenter). 'May I always be at hand to help you in trouble.'

'You are very good, *mistree-je;* you saved me from an ugly fall.'

'May I hope to save you from a still greater one?'

The girl laughed a forced laugh, and freed herself from his hold.

'Will you think about what I said to you at the *Baoli-sahib?* Will you, Sammuria?'

'Yes, I will,' was the impulsive reply from Moradun, who was cut to the heart by Mahir's prolonged neglect of her, and his evident hankering after Lateefun. 'Yes, I will,' she said once more, this time

with a smile which was reflected in the Sikh *mistree's* earnest face.

Mahir, finding that there was nothing more to be got out of old Begum just then, had turned round to go to his stables, and, as fate would have it, came face to face with Moradun and the *mistree* at the moment they were smiling at each other.

Moradun's heart stood still, and the sinister expression already on Mahir's face became a shade darker; but he passed on without a word, being much exercised in mind just then about Lateefun.

Talking to herself Begum went homeward:

'I wonder,' she soliloquized, 'who told him that Abdulla was teaching the girl. Since her escape from the arms of death and her great bereavement, my dear mistress—may the blessing of God rest upon her white head!—can refuse nothing to the wilful child. What good is to come of all this reading and talking, I cannot see; but I belong to a past generation, and the young folks only mock at us now.'

As she concluded these reflections a burst of sunshine came through the rifted clouds, and a mighty rainbow spanned the sky. Lateefun saw it from her window, and hailed it as an omen of better days.

'Have you married Mahir Din?' asked the *mistree.* 'Have you? Tell me!'

'No,' said Moradun very unwillingly, and, annoyed by the offensive allusion to Mahir, walked off in the direction of the bazaar.

Ajeet Singh did not attempt to detain her; but, after saying with a good deal of feeling, 'Think over my proposal,' he stood for a minute watching her as she went down the road.

Her wanderings, which were somewhat aimless, took her to the open *chowk* before the elegant and imposing mosque of Wazir Khan, and here her attention was attracted by a man, fairly well dressed standing near the white-domed tomb of Syad Suf with uplifted face and both arms outstretched towards heaven, crying aloud, '*Ya Allah! hukum jaldee bhājo! Ya Allah! hukum jaldee bhājo!*' ('Oh, God! send Thy orders quickly!') In this fanatic Moradun at once recognised Sher Afghan, Lateefun's unfortunate father-in-law; and, having nothing particular to do, she sat down on the stone steps leading to the entrance of the mosque to watch him. She asked a woman who was near at hand how long he had been there.

'For hours,' was the reply; 'and he never tires of calling upon Allah.'

'Does he come here often?' inquired Moradun.

'Yes, every day,' replied the woman.

'What does he want? What orders is he asking for? Doesn't it make one's heart quake to hear him!'

'Yes, it *is* dreadful. I don't know what he

wants,' said the woman. 'He is a religious man, a *pir;* but there are people who think that he has suffered a great wrong at the hands of somebody, and that he is calling upon Allah to avenge him. He comes to this place every day, and cries to Allah like that for at least three hours without stopping!'

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concerning many of the illustrations, as Abdulla had, for her benefit and his own pleasure, several times read the text relating to them, and had posted her up in the facts which they were meant to represent. And Lateefun would be very proud of her knowledge, imparting it to her friends with conscious importance, wishing the while that she could read the text for herself, and get lots of other picture-books to study and explain to her admiring playmates. In fact, the influence of her circumstances and her environment were telling upon her impressionable nature. If the boys, she thought, were allowed to study English, why could she not do so? Besides, there was a competent teacher at hand, and this fact may have had as much to do as anything else with her very pronounced leaning towards the study of English. If nothing more, Abdulla might surely teach her to read the brown volume which, with the blessed Koran, had saved her life in those dreadful days.

Having only a doting mother to deal with, the child was not to be denied, and, to his infinite delight and astonishment, Abdulla found himself one day installed as tutor to his fair cousin.

Of course, the whole thing was to be kept *very* secret. The proprieties were on no account to be infringed, consequently the lessons were given at night, shortly after candle-light, and the *Moglâni* would sit and watch the pair as Lateefun, under the guidance of Abdulla, went laboriously through the study of the first rudiments of the English language. But discussions on religious subjects were far more

common than linguistic studies, and Abdulla's time was largely spent in explaining what the Padre sahib (the missionary) had said about any matter that came up.

'Now, let me tell you what the Padre sahib said,' was a common expression with him, for he was in that early stage of his education when the master enjoys unbounded reverence for his learning, and the Padre sahib, the only European Abdulla had ever had any dealings with, was in his eyes the very embodiment of European wisdom and knowledge.

The *Moglâni*, poor old lady, would weary of these talks, which she considered purposeless, unedifying, and tending to unnecessary waste of time, so, after Abdulla had been teaching Lateefun for a few weeks, she would, from sheer *ennui*, often leave the young folks alone together for a little while.

Common prudence dictated that that young scamp Muhammad should be kept out of the secret of these surreptitious studies. When he wanted to know why his brother came to his aunt's house every evening, he was told that Abdulla was required to make up the *Moglâni's* accounts; that he had to read certain legal documents, and frame certain petitions to Government, with respect to some old property of which the family had been unlawfully dispossessed. But his suspicious nature was not satisfied; so one day, leaving his shoes at the foot of the stairs, he climbed noiselessly up to the first floor, and applying his eye to a chink in the closed door of a room from which sounds of conversation reached him, he was able to satisfy himself in what

manner and to what extent the legal documents were being studied, and the family property looked after by his elder brother. As he peeped through the narrow chink, he saw Abdulla, with the aid of a small horse-shoe magnet, some needles, and a stick of sealing-wax, giving Lateefun a lesson in Natural Science, speaking, as he did so, in a mixture of Urdu and English. The *Moglâni* was not present, and, to judge from their animated faces, the two young people were evidently enjoying their studies immensely. The magnet passed from hand to hand between them, the needles were drawn about the floor hither and thither, and chips of straw and paper were being made to rise to and fly off from the stick of sealing-wax.

'Do you know,' said Abdulla, 'I am like these bits of paper sticking to that rod. What are you like, Lateefun?'

'I don't know,' replied the blushing girl; 'I suppose I am like these needles: humbly useful, but rather dangerous.'

'Wrong,' said Abdulla reproachfully, 'quite wrong. I am the needle also.'

'Then what am I?' asked Lateefun.

'You are the attracting-rod, that's what you are.'

'Oh! I see,' said the girl archly. 'I am the attracting-rod to which the straws attach themselves for a moment, only to fly off again.'

'You are too clever for me,' was Abdulla's rather sheepish reply to this sally. 'You are as sharp as a needle.'

'That is just what I said I was—a needle.'

'You shall say no more then,' and the boy, bending forward, kissed her parted lips with youthful fervour, while, no doubt, the hot blood coursed madly through his veins.

The *Moglâni's* returning footsteps were the unwelcome signal for the renewal of serious study.

Muhammad also heard the old lady's footsteps, and not wishing to be caught eavesdropping, sneaked down the stairs, rather astonished at his own discovery; but it was useless to attempt to keep him in the dark any longer. He soon let those most concerned know that he had seen and heard some highly interesting things, and he became henceforth a terror to the lovers, for they dreaded his mischievous temper and unruly tongue. Having the whip-hand of them now, he would come and knock at the door of the room till he was admitted, and, uninvited, would undertake to examine Lateefun in respect to the progress she had been making in the study of English.

'Spell *love*,' he would ask her; 'Spell *fool*,' and so on, till Abdulla, quite furious, would shove him, laughing and struggling, out of the room.

'Aunt,' the extruded urchin would cry out; 'aunt, she is learning nothing. Send her to school if you wish her to be an English *memsahib*.'

In this way several weeks went by, during which, certainly, very little serious study was carried on, but the girl's ideas expanded, and her trust in the wisdom of Abdulla became so unbounded, that, had

she known the words, she would probably have said what was in her heart: 'Whither thou goest I will go, thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.'

It was indeed a complete and willing surrender on her part.

CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE.

So matters had been going on, till the *Moglâni* was surprised by an unexpected visit from her brother, Sadiq Ali, who, for twenty years or more, had quite ignored her existence. In their younger days no very cordial relations had existed between them, and she remembered him as a strong-willed, selfish man, ready to sacrifice anything, or anyone, to his own personal convenience or pecuniary interests. There was something about his appearance on the occasion of this visit suggestive of a come-down in the world, but the *Moglâni* dismissed the thought from her mind, as she recalled to memory the shrewdness of the man, and the substantial property he had acquired, years before, by his clever unscrupulousness in business. However, whether he were really down on his luck now, or deliberately looking shabby in order to prevent any demands being made upon him, this at least was certain, that he, her only brother, had to be received civilly and hospitably treated. But his presence was undeniably unwelcome to her, and, as they sat together discussing old times, she recalled with painful vividness his un-

accountable hatred of Abdulla's father, and the deliberate way in which he had maliciously persecuted and ultimately ruined the man, his own brother-in-law, who had generously befriended him in his early life, and who, to the end, would think no evil of his implacable if insidious enemy.

Sadiq Ali was a man of middle height, spare, with long, pointed features, and small but keen eyes. His ample beard was carefully trimmed, and dyed red with henna; his gray moustaches were closely cut to show the upper lip, in the orthodox Muhammadan fashion. His teeth were good, and his lips narrow and firm. His small but sinewy hands were always scrupulously clean, and his nails carefully trimmed. His clothes were somewhat shabby, but they were delicately perfumed, and his appearance and bearing were, on the whole, those of a gentleman. His face betokened a man of some force of character.

Although so many years had passed since he had even inquired about his sister, he entered her house like a privileged visitor, quite at his ease, and had hardly taken a seat upon the carpet when he asked to see Lateefun, and was demonstratively affectionate towards her when she made her appearance rather shyly. Abdulla and Muhammad were sent for by the *Moglâni*, and were inspected, catechised, and pronounced likely lads by her brother, who, however, could not conceal the irritation he felt at the *Moglâni's* praise of Abdulla's abilities.

'It is to be hoped,' he said, 'that Abdulla is not as great a dreamer as his *Sufi* father used to be.

The boy strongly resembles his father. Don't you think so?'

Sadiq Ali remembered Begum, and had a talk with her about old times; but she could recall those old times also, and was not too friendly towards the unexpected visitor. He soon learnt all the recent troubles of the family, and condoled with them in apparent sincerity. Lateefun's beauty made a very visible impression on her uncle.

'This dear child is just what you, my sister, used to be at her age. You were very handsome then, and might have married an exceedingly wealthy man in a good position; but you were self-willed, I remember. But that is past and gone; the world has moved on since those days. Yes, indeed it has. Look at our white heads, sister. Our day is past; but we must see what can be done for my little niece here.'

With a blush suffusing her sweet face Lateefun rose, and quietly left the room. She had no wish to have anything *done* for her; nor did she feel particularly pleased at this intrusive and patronizing interference in her affairs on the part of an uncle who had never seen her, or troubled himself about her, before.

Now, this old man had not come to visit his sister and her family without an object. Things had gone badly with him of late years. Through unfortunate speculations his property had dwindled down to a shadow, and his income to a mere pittance. He had no reason to think his sister could be living in affluence, and he did not purpose getting anything

out of her; but he had a letter in his pocket which gave him the hope of making some money for himself out of the affairs of the family. The letter, which was anonymous, ran thus:

'To every man God has assigned his duties to perform, and amongst these the duties which one owes to one's kith and kin stand foremost. You have, by the blessing of Allah, a very beautiful niece; why do you not look after her? She is secretly learning English now from her penniless cousin, Abdulla, and when this news gets abroad, who will stop the mouths of the gossips, and save her from shame? A well-to-do man is willing to marry your niece, but how can he offer to do so while these things go on? Come to Mozung and put matters right, and if the suitor is accepted you may safely calculate upon substantial benefit to yourself.

'This is written in good faith, as God knows. Keep everything in your own heart, for the sake of the family and yourself.'

This letter had brought the uncle to visit the family in which he had ceased for many years to take the least interest. He engaged a small house for himself near by, but he frequented his sister's place at all hours, so that the usual routine of life in the *Moglâni's* family was inconveniently disturbed. His quiet, penetrating eye was everywhere, consequently Abdulla's visits became less frequent, and the English lessons an impossibility, for the uncle never failed to be at the *Moglâni's* every evening after lamp-light. A covert allusion to

the interrupted English studies, made casually by that irrepressible and decidedly objectional youngster Muhammad, gave the uncle the opportunity he wanted of ferreting out the matter in a sort of bantering way. When, to little Lateefun's disgust and dismay, he had, by artful questioning, wormed out the main facts of her intercourse with Abdulla, he put on an air of great solemnity and shocked modesty before expressing his strong disapproval of such doings.

'What, in Allah's name, could you have been thinking of, Fatamah?' said he to his sister, 'to allow such foolishness—such culpable foolishness? It is to be hoped nobody has heard of this stupid affair, for it would lead to a serious scandal, and bring discredit on us all. Lateefun, my child,' he went on, turning his face towards the pouting and rebellious girl, 'promise me that you will give up this folly for ever. Come here and pledge me your word that you will behave more circumspectly in future.'

But the girl's face grew red, and a frown gathered on her brow, as she said:

'I can't see, uncle, what harm there is in learning English any more than in learning Arabic. All the boys learn English now.'

'But boys and girls are very different, little one; and,' with authoritative emphasis, 'my good niece will be content with the queen of languages in which the sacred Koran is written.'

Not to learn English meant not to see Abdulla, and that was more than Lateefun was prepared to yield without a struggle. She sullenly left the room,

and her uncle, turning upon his sister, lectured her severely upon her unwisdom, and the serious consequences that might have arisen out of such reprehensible carelessness on her part.

'English, indeed! taught by a young man too! What would the world say if even a hint of such proceedings got beyond the walls of the house? What——'

Irritated by his manner, the *Moglâni*, who was a high-spirited woman, interrupted him with:

'A fig for the world! Lateefun is a good and innocent child, and so is Abdulla. I am not going to listen to any more about them, or this matter, so drop the subject, brother.'

After this affair a sort of cloud settled upon the house. The boys kept away; Lateefun sulked when her uncle came; the *Moglâni* was curt in her manner, and Begum all but openly hostile to the unwelcome visitor.

He, however, had still his work before him, having not yet even discovered the author of the anonymous letter which had brought him to Mozung; but within a few days of this conversation he was interviewed by Mahir Din, who, professing great friendship for the family, cautiously and circuitously learned from him that the English lessons had been peremptorily stopped, and were at an end *for ever*. That point gained, Mahir made his proposal formally, asking the hand of Lateefun in marriage, and slyly coupling it with a promise of five hundred rupees to the Moulvie sahib, as he came to be generally called in Mozung, if he would help his suit to a successful issue.

would not for any amount of money help you to wed my niece,' said the uncle, 'if I were not assured that you are an honourable man, and able to keep her in comfort! I need not say, for you must know it already, that I have a strong personal regard for you, Mahir Din, and that I shall be glad to bring about this match in due course. I do not like accepting anything from you, but my business at Delhi is suffering very much by my being here looking after the interests of the family. However, for your sake, my friend and, if it please God, my *nephew*, I am content.'

'By your favour, Moulvie sahib, all will go well,' was the hopeful reply.

The proposal was without delay laid before the *Moglâni* by her brother, who explained all the advantages of a match with such a spirited and well-to-do man as Mahir Din. To the old lady the proposed alliance seemed anything but desirable, for Mahir and his people were not men of any family or social standing, though they had accumulated some little wealth amongst them. Besides, the seclusion in which she lived was not so complete as to shut out from her all knowledge of the way in which Mahir had dealt with Moradun, and the irregular relations that had at one time existed between them. Not wishing to bring about an open rupture with her brother, she did not decline the offer; but deferred her decision, saying that the death of Hakim Ali was too recent for such matters to be discussed with any propriety. On sounding Lateefun, privately and cautiously, regarding this offer of marriage, her uncle

found her obstinately opposed to any consideration of the proposals of Mahir Din 'now or hereafter,' as she emphatically said.

Thus both mother and daughter were strongly averse to a marriage into Mahir Din's family, their inherited pride and refinement revolting against a union with so plebeian a stock; while a more potent consideration with Lateefun was that she had given away her heart already. And this her shrewd uncle divined quickly enough. He accordingly took an unmistakable dislike to Abdulla, whom he made it his business to snub on every possible occasion. He also spoke slightingly of him in Lateefun's hearing, and did whatever he could to discredit him in the *Moglâni's* opinion. The boy was plainly a serious stumbling-block in the way of the selfish old schemer's plans, and on that account he could hardly tolerate his presence.

Though vexed and annoyed by the *Moglâni's* and Lateefun's attitude in this matter, the uncle had no intention of communicating such unwelcome news to Mahir Din; so, wily man that he was, he assured the ardent suitor that the girl was by no means disinclined towards him, but had asked for more time, as indeed was only natural and decorous under the painful circumstances of her recent bereavement. In his own mind the Moulvie sahib had no doubt of Lateefun's eventual consent, for he intended bending her to his will if necessary, and extorting her assent to the marriage; for it would be too absurd for a child like that to stand between him and the comfortable sum of money—much more than five

hundred rupees—which he had determined to get out of the ardent suitor.

So Mahir Din was kept in high good-humour by the artful Moulvie sahib, who encouraged him to hope for Lateefun's hand, while he was using his personal influence to the utmost with the *Moglâni* and her daughter to obtain a favourable answer to Mahir's suit.

Day by day Sadiq Ali acquired increased influence in the *Moglâni's* house. At first he confined himself to suggestions about trifling details of household management. This was not in its proper place, that might have been cleaner, and so on. By degrees he became more free and personal in his criticisms, saying, for example:

'What a want of refinement there is in your speech,' or 'Surely you have forgotten Urdu since you settled here,' and things equally unpalatable. At length he interfered in all his sister's domestic and social concerns, occasionally scolding her for not attending to his recommendations. Sometimes he would fly into a rage and make the poor women of the household utterly uncomfortable. The *Moglâni*, though resenting his interference and his overbearing manners, and occasionally doing battle for her own independence, felt, to her own great annoyance and dismay (a feeling shared by unhappy Lateefun), that she was losing ground little by little, and gradually falling under her domineering brother's sway.

Mahir, acting under the Moulvie sahib's advice, never told anyone about his negotiations for the

hand of Lateefun, while Begum and the two boys were, for obvious reasons, kept in entire ignorance of Mahir's offer of marriage, the *Moglâni* and Lateefun hoping that the matter would soon be dropped.

In the midst of these schemings and plottings the *mulla* at the mosque sent for Mahir, and after some preliminary inquiries about Moradun, said, 'I have been told, my son, that when this woman embraced our holy religion you were on intimate terms with her. Is this true?'

'It is true, your honour,' Mahir had to admit.

'And I hear,' resumed the *mulla*, 'that the girl is likely to drift away to Sikhism. Is that also true?'

'I cannot tell,' said Mahir with a start. 'I hope not. But who has been telling your honour such things?'

'It matters not, my son, who told me these things; but take note that I do not desire that a sheep who has entered our fold should be carried off by a lion. See to this. You understand?'

'I do,' said Mahir, and took his leave, not a little worried as to the course he was to pursue.

What the *mulla* had told him excited Mahir's jealousy, hurt his pride, and aroused his religious fanaticism. While hankering after a marriage with Lateefun, he had never for a moment contemplated the possibility of quite losing Moradun, whom, although he had meanly and selfishly neglected her, he looked upon as his own, bodily and spiritually. As a follower of Islam, he had, like the Jewish patriarchs of old, the legal privilege of possessing a

plurality of wives, and he did not shrink from the thought of making Moradun one of his wives, only Lateefun must be first secured, as he felt sure that a public recognition of Moradun's claims upon him would, through the *Moglâni's* pride, be an insuperable difficulty in the way of a marriage with her daughter.

He looked upon the *mulla's* commands as imperative, particularly as they were backed up by his own feelings of hostility to Ajeet Singh and his partiality for Moradun; but the affair had cropped up at a most inopportune moment. The position, he felt, was an extremely awkward one for himself. He must at all hazards avoid a scandal or undue publicity, otherwise his chances of marrying Lateefun would be destroyed beyond hope.

Not without hesitation, therefore, and many misgivings did Mahir Din set out to seek for Moradun. He found her, however, easily enough, not far from the *mistree's* house, employed in helping some women who were grinding corn. When she saw Mahir she carefully drew her veil over her face, a movement which, although simple and natural enough, caused him considerable irritation, for he felt it was her mute protest against further intercourse with him.

As he approached her she turned her back upon him, lowered her head, and continued her labours. When he drew nearer the other women moved away, and Mahir, addressing Moradun in a low voice, said:

'Why will you work for others when my mother

wants your services? You know she loves you, and will pay you well.'

Moradun hesitated a few moments, and then said, with a sort of mock humility:

'This is a very great favour. I am your honour's slave, and your mother's slave, but your hired servant I will not be.'

'Has the *mistree* so bewitched you that you talk like this, Moradun? My house is your home, surely.'

'It might have been; I thought you meant that once, but I hear—— However, let it pass.'

'The *mistree* had better——' began Mahir, speaking loudly, when the *mistree* himself came up and said in an authoritative manner:

'What about the *mistree?* Leave the girl alone and go your way. She is——'

'Dare you speak so to me, and about a Mussulmani?' rejoined Mahir, firing up.

'Dare I?' said the Sikh. 'Dare I?' approaching close up to Mahir in a menacing way.

'Don't try to frighten me by looking fierce, you pig-eater.'

These words had hardly passed Mahir's lips, when they were resented by a heavy blow, and the two men closed in a desperate fight. Both were unarmed, and the odds were pretty equal. The Sikh, however, was by far the stronger of the two, though less active than his younger adversary. Their blood was up, and both men meant mischief. They struck fiercely at each other, but the Sikh had the cooler head. In a minute a number of men had flocked round the combatants, a few women hovering on

the outskirts. A free fight was by no means improbable, for both Hindus and Muhammadans had caught up such weapons as were to hand before rushing out to see what was going on.

Mahir had been cut about pretty freely by the Sikh's iron bracelet and by the rings on his fingers. A Mussulman seeing this, and not wishing that his co-religionist should get the worst of the fight, thrust a short but substantial stick into his hand. Without hesitation, for he was blind with rage, Mahir brought it down with a terrible crash upon the Sikh's head. Fortunately for Ajeet Singh, his big top-knot of hair and an iron ring bound in it saved his head from serious damage, but he reeled under the furiously-delivered blow. In an instant a young carpenter from the *mistree's* workshop pushed an adze into his master's strong right hand. Up it went as quick as thought, and was descending on Mahir's head. The women shrieked, but Moradun, who had pushed to the front, came with one bound between the two men. Notwithstanding Ajeet Singh's effort to avoid her, the descending adze grazed her shoulder, and then struck Mahir a spent blow on the thigh. A shout went up from the Hindus: 'The woman saved him! The woman saved him!'

The girl, whose clothes were crimsoned with blood, instinctively drew her veil over her face, but was too dazed to make an effort to move away. Ajeet Singh was so much concerned about her, although she had saved his rival, that he seemed for the moment to quite forget the fight. Biting taunts were hurled by Ajeet's partizans at Mahir on

account of his *rescue by a woman*, which so enraged him that he turned upon Moradun, and saying '*Gehunnum jao!*' ('To hell with you!'), pushed her rudely and violently aside. 'Come on!' he cried to Ajeet Singh, flourishing his stick in the air. 'Come on!'

Ajeet Singh was ready and willing enough, and not the less so when the taunts hurled at Mahir Din reminded him of Moradun's devotion to his adversary. But before the fight so suddenly interrupted could be renewed, several of the elders, fearing serious consequences, interfered vigorously to prevent it, and at the same time two or three constables came up to arrest the disturbers of the public peace. Their arrival was the signal for a general stampede. Ajeet Singh and Mahir Din, with a few others, remained on the spot, and in the end the affair was hushed up, but not until several rupees had slipped into the capacious *kummerbunds* (waistbands) of the constables, to whom such breaches of the peace were acceptable, if not legitimate, sources of income.

In the village, people were not unanimous in their interpretation of Moradun's interposition in the fight. One party held that she rushed in to save Ajeet Singh from committing the crime of homicide, another that her object was to save him from Mahir's fury, and a third insisted that she risked her life to protect Mahir from the *mistree's* adze.

CHAPTER XII.

KISMET.

ABOUT a week or so after the fight between Mahir and Ajeet Singh several persons were congregated in the market-place, discussing recent events. At the moment we refer to, an aged Muslim was saying:

'How with the *Eed* the sorrows of our lives have been lifted! the world smiles again like a garden, and men's hearts are glad once more.'

'Yes, Debi has been gracious,' struck in a Hindu. 'What princely offerings were made at Niaz Beg to Bhadar Kâli! and she has stayed the plague.'

'Allah alone could stay the plague,' sternly put in a Muhammadan.

'Debi, Allah, Permeshwar, it is all one in the end,' said a Hindu pantheist mildly.

'It is not so,' hotly rejoined a truculent Muslim, looking as if he would very much like to settle the question by an appeal to the cudgel in his hand.

To give a turn to the conversation, which evidently had a tendency to become unpleasant, an elderly woman, seated on a low wooden stool at the door of a small shop, deftly spinning cotton-thread, remarked:

'Alas, how many terrible and untoward events have happened during the past few months!'

'Yes,' said a bystander, 'many unfortunates, whether they were Hindus or Mussulmans, passed away in those dreadful days. Such, poor things, was their *kismet* (fate).'

'Aye, that is quite true. After all, it is *kismet*. Whatever is written in a man's fate, that will happen.'

'Indeed, who can doubt it?' chimed in both Hindus and Muslims, for *this* was common ground of belief.

'You have heard the story about the Brahman's daughter, have you not?' observed the woman spinning cotton-thread, who was a good talker, and had seen something of the world outside Mozung. 'No? Then listen.'

Immediately a group of ten or twelve persons, ever ready to give ear to a tale, settled themselves about her, some sitting and some standing. When the audience was ready, the woman began her narrative:

'There were six or seven brothers of the Brahman caste, all married and all childless. This want of offspring was a source of much heart-burning to the brothers, and they longed and prayed that one at least amongst them might be favoured by Heaven with a child, to perform their funeral rites. After years of waiting, a female child was at length born in the house of one of the younger brothers; and when, according to custom, her nativity was cast, the astrologers declared that, after attaining the age

of twelve years, she, the offspring of Brahmans, would actually eat with Muhammadans.'

'And why not?' said Mahir Din, who had just joined the group; 'Hindu girls, I can tell you, don't dislike the Mussulmans so very much,' a remark which raised a titter amongst some of the young Muslims standing about.

'Do listen, brother,' said an elderly bystander, addressing Mahir; and the woman, who was all the while industriously spinning her cotton-thread, quietly resumed her story:

'The expected joy from the birth of the child was turned into mourning, and the parents bitterly lamented the disgrace that was to fall upon their family. However mortifying to them this prediction, it was kept a profound secret, and the girl grew up. When she was close upon the critical age mentioned by the astrologers, her parents were in great alarm. What was to be done? Was there no means of averting the dreaded pollution?'

'Pollution indeed!' struck in Mahir contemptuously.

'Anything,' the woman went on, unheeding the interruption, 'were better in their eyes than the impending horror. In despair, the parents attempted the life of their child by poison. Somehow or other they failed in effecting their purpose. The girl noticed that some secret was preying upon the hearts of her father and mother, and that she was the cause of their unhappiness, for children are wonderfully knowing. She inquired about it; she coaxed them to tell her, and, at last, by her en-

treaties, succeeded in learning the true reason of their dejection and misery. The girl, like a true Brahman, shrank with dismay from the fate which seemed to await her. She locked herself up alone in a room without food or water, in order to die of starvation. Three or four days elapsed, the heart-broken parents opened the door of the room, and found the poor child dying.'

'Alas! alas!' came simultaneously from several sympathetic voices amongst the listeners.

'She soon became insensible, upon which her parents proclaimed the death and prepared the funeral rites of their innocent child. The body was conveyed to the banks of the river for cremation, and laid upon a pyre. The fire was lighted, but a steady downpour of rain kept it from blazing up. A terrific storm came on, and the river rising, rapidly carried away the entire pile with the corpse upon it. The body, left to the tender mercies of the stream, but still supported by some of the wood of the pyre, floated away with the current. The cool water partially restored the inanimate girl to consciousness. Instinctively she cried for help, which was readily afforded by some boatmen who were at hand. Observing her emaciated condition, they put food into her mouth, and she ate eagerly. With returning consciousness, it suddenly occurred to her to inquire to what caste her kind entertainers belonged. What was her horror to learn that they were Muhammadans. Thus was the *decree* of Fate accomplished in spite of every effort to avert it.'

'Quite true, quite true,' assented the bystanders, 'there is no flying from one's fate.'

Old Begum, who, seated with a beautiful yellow melon in her shrivelled hands, had been listening to the narrative, now rose and hobbled away, muttering to herself:

'That was a very strange story, a very strange story indeed. What will happen to Lateefun, I wonder? Will she marry some European? *Toba!* God forbid!' and she spat on the ground. 'It is very strange,' she went on, talking to herself, 'but I can well remember how that old *Yogi*, with matted hair and withered arm, sitting under the great *peepul*-tree by the river, to whom I took her secretly, when she was nearly dying, years ago, told me she would recover, that she would afterwards pass through great trouble, and would one day be the wife of an *Isahi* (Christian). She did recover—may God protect my poor child!—but the other part cannot be true, for was she not married, or as good as married, to Hakim Ali, and he a Muslim of the Muslims? And now other arrangements are being whispered about, though they are kept secret from old Begum; but somehow I don't like that English sahib constantly poking about our village, taking pictures with that strange box of his. What can he want with poor people's pictures? Mozung is good enough for us, but it is not a city with big houses, mosques, and bazaars to look at. He has somehow seen Lateefun, I know he has, for his servant slyly offered me a rupee the other day—nay, five rupees—if I would induce

her to let him take her portrait. Portrait indeed! I foolishly told the child about it, and she began to laugh. Girls are not half as modest as they used to be. They see how the *Velaitee mem-log* (English ladies) go about, and they think it would be very fine to do the same themselves.'

Now what old Begum had been muttering to herself about the *Yogi's* prediction was known to at least two or three others; for the garrulous old woman could, of course, never keep her own counsel. Even Lateefun had heard the story. Abdulla had recently found it out, and it produced a very marked effect upon him. As long as Hakim Ali, the bridegroom, lived, Abdulla's dream of the 'beloved' had only been a sentimental longing; but those English studies by lamplight, those dear, delightful hours of sweet discussion, those stolen kisses, had turned the sentimental longing into a headlong, unreasoning, uncontrollable passion. The prediction which haunted him was, it is true, made by a Hindu ascetic, yet few Indian Muslims can quite free themselves from a belief in the mysterious knowledge, wisdom, and power of these infidel sages. Then, strangely enough, there was, as old Begum said, a European often hanging about. True, he only came for photographs, but what if *Fate* had brought him there? The mere thought of this would make the lad's heart stand still, and bring the sweat in beads upon his forehead.

Do what he would to put away from his mind the *Yogi's* unpleasant prediction, it haunted him continually. It obtruded itself between him and his

studies; it seemed to ring in his ears with ominous significance. He asked Begum again and again about it, and it was a satisfaction to him, though not a very keen one, to find that the *Yogi* prophesied that Lateefun would one day be the bride of a *Christian*—he had not said *European:* Begum was quite sure of that, a fact which afforded Abdulla some glimmering rays of consolation, for he felt—latitudinarian that he was—that it might not be so difficult to profess Christianity, since, as his father had taught him, and his fellow sectarians held, there would in the end be no Hindu and no Mussulman, no Jew and no Christian, only 'the beloved.'

Still, such a step would be big with very unpleasant consequences. It would certainly lead to a complete and immediate rupture of all family ties, all old associations. He would be cast adrift at once from his people and his friends, and Lateefun herself might possibly be the first to spurn him. *For* 'the beloved' Abdulla felt he could bring himself to embrace Christianity, and thus distance any Muslim rival; but *without* her such a step would be madness—worse than madness; it would be suicide.

Meanwhile, at the school, the Padre sahib was flatteringly kind to Abdulla, gently leading him into new paths, being aided powerfully by the boy's Sufiïsm and the fateful prediction of the *Yogi*, which was never absent from Abdulla's mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRITICAL MOMENT.

ALTHOUGH matters had been kept as secret as possible regarding Mahir's prospects of marrying Lateefun, that excitable young man could not quite conceal from his friends that he was expecting to come in for some good fortune very shortly. Elated with thoughts of his anticipated happiness, he invited Abdulla to inspect certain alterations and additions he was making to his house. He hoped, of course, that, through Abdulla, the *Mogláni*, and eventually Lateefun, would come to know how much money he was spending, and what a fine three-storied house his would be after the completion of the improvements he was rapidly carrying out. He showed Abdulla all over the new portions, now nearly finished.

'Look at these new rooms, Abdulla,' he said. 'See how I have had the walls painted green. Is it not beautiful? You don't speak.'

'Yes; it is very nice,' was the reply.

'Now come this way.' And taking his companion to the roof of the house, up the unfinished stairs, Mahir bid him 'Look round,' adding, 'Is not

mine the highest house in this part of the town? How plainly visible from here are the houses and mosques of the city! you can recognise them all. And, see! those are the towers of the hospital, and that, to the right, the railway-station—like a fort. Won't this roof be a fine place for one's *charpoy* on a summer night? What do you say?'

'Yes, it will,' was Abdulla's reluctant reply.

'Much better than your place down that narrow alley, Abdulla? But it has cost me a lot of money, I can tell you—thousands of rupees—to build this house.'

But Abdulla's undisguised indifference to all this display of prosperity irritated him, and his latent ill-feeling towards the lad being only too easily aroused, he tauntingly asked him before they parted, with a very quizzical expression on his face, if it was true he had taken to giving lessons *in English*.

At this significant question, put very pointedly, Abdulla's eyes were opened and his anxieties awakened, but he evaded the inquiry in a jesting way—by offering to teach Mahir English for a suitable consideration, if he was not too dull to learn.

After Abdulla had parted from Mahir, and had proceeded a short distance from the house, a veiled woman, standing in a retired corner, beckoned him to follow her—which he did hesitatingly, wondering all the while what she wanted. As he went down the narrow lane after her, he felt the awkwardness of his position, and looked to the right and to the left of him to see whether there were any eyes watching him.

At length the veiled figure stopped and, turning round, asked him abruptly, but in an unnatural, assumed voice:

'Is it quite settled that Mahir Din is to marry Lateefun very soon?'

Although the question sent an icy chill to Abdulla's heart, he replied with as much nonchalance as he could command:

'Before I answer I must first know who my fair questioner is.'

'You shall, if you promise not to tell anyone that you have seen her.'

'*Khoda Ki Kasam* (I swear by God) I will not tell!' said Abdulla, with the impetuousness of youth.

'Then see!'

And, lifting her *burqa*, she revealed the face of Moradun, who was no longer attired in a *saree*, but in the costume—pantalettes and tunic—worn by Muslim women in the Punjab.

'Oh! you here? It has long been believed that you had left the village.'

'I am here, you see, and at your mercy, now—but you won't betray me?'

'That I certainly will not,' said Abdulla with warmth.

He had never before been quite so near Moradun, nor in so good a position to appreciate the comeliness of her youthful face and figure.

'Now, then,' she said, laying a hand upon his arm—for she had felt the advantage she had gained, and wished to profit by it—'now, then: answer my question about the marriage.'

Abdulla's heart again grew chill, but he stammered out:

'I don't know anything about it.'

'Oh, you won't tell me!' said Moradun. 'I thought one time that *you* would perhaps marry your beautiful cousin; but Mahir Din is rich, eh?'

'I don't know,' was all Abdulla could say.

'Why, you have just been inspecting the improvements which are being made to the house. I saw you from an inner room—and you say you don't know. Besides, your uncle is with Mahir every day, and when he goes away he always leaves Mahir in high good-humour. Your uncle—as, of course, you know full well—has just gone to Delhi with his pockets full of rupees, and will be back in a fortnight, when matters will, no doubt, be pushed on.'

Moradun, when she said all this, said nothing that was not true; but what she wanted was to find out, if possible, from Abdulla the real state of affairs, and the probability of an early marriage. She never doubted that he must be in the secrets of the family, for secrets there certainly were, and they related to Mahir and Lateefun; of that, at least, she had no doubt whatever.

For weeks past, Abdulla, repulsed by his uncle's deliberate rudeness, had not ventured near the *Moglâni's* house, so, as he now listened to Moradun, he felt that all was over, and that his wild dream—for dream it could only be—of 'the beloved' was fading quickly into nothingness; but, with Oriental imperturbability, he disguised his troubled feelings, and

lightly told Moradun he could not reveal the family secrets to her.

'If what you say is true,' said Abdulla in conclusion of their conversation, 'surely your friend, Mahir Din, will tell you everything you want to know.'

'Yes, I suppose so; but *please* don't tell your aunt that you saw me in his house'—which was just exactly what she wished him to do.

With a forced laugh, which ill concealed his troubled feelings, Abdulla turned and went towards the mosque to say his evening prayers, for the *azan* was being called from the minaret, and the words, 'Come to prayers! come to prayers!' floated on the evening air.

In regard to Moradun, the reader should be told that, after the fight between Mahir and Ajeet Singh, of which she was the innocent cause, and in which she had so courageously interfered at the risk of her life, she had concealed herself in one of the *serais* of Lahore, donning the *burqa* for the first time in her life; and it required all the keenness and penetration of a woman to enable Mahir's mother to trace and find her under her disguise. When she had done so she delivered a message with which she was charged to Moradun—a solemn message to this effect:

'Decide now, and for ever, whether Ajeet Singh or Mahir Din is to be henceforth the butt of men's ridicule.'

On receiving this message the girl, pleading feebly for honourable treatment, had risen and followed Mahir's mother to her home.

In the village all trace of the girl was lost, and it was surmised that she had left it and gone away, no one knew whither. Ajeet Singh had tried to find her, but without success, as she had been kept in seclusion, for it did not suit Mahir to let it be known that she was in his house, at least, till his negotiations for the hand of Lateefun had been carried to a successful termination.

In response to the summons from the minaret, which had caused Abdulla to turn his footsteps towards the mosque, Mahir had also issued from his house, and, as ill-luck would have it, saw Moradun and Abdulla exchanging their last words. He heard the lad's laugh, and caught his own name as it was uttered by Abdulla.

What possible business could she have with Abdulla? Had she been telling the lad that he had promised to marry her? Had she been spoiling his chance with Lateefun?

These thoughts flashed through his brain like lightning. He rushed at Moradun and struck her violently across the side of the face with a short stick which he carried in his hand, saying:

'I told you to keep indoors, didn't I?—didn't I?' striking her again so severely that the poor girl fell to the ground.

She rose again quickly. Her magnificent eyes looked at him reproachfully but tearlessly.

'I have committed a great fault,' she said, and ran towards the house.

It was the first time in her life that she had been struck by a man, and, Eastern woman that she was,

her only feeling at the moment was a bitter hatred of Lateefun as the cause of it, and she cursed her and her beauty from the bottom of her angry heart.

After this display of evil temper Mahir went on to the mosque, where Abdulla was already at his devotions.

Prayers uttered in Arabic, of which language he knew nothing, did Mahir little good, and he left the mosque with mingled feelings of shame and irritation. To Abdulla also his formal prayers had brought little consolation. As he left the assembly he felt his hopes crushed, his future unbearable. Life for him seemed blighted.

'So it has come to this,' he thought bitterly. 'Mahir is to marry Lateefun—Mahir, that uneducated, unrefined *ekka-wallah*, to marry the proud *Moglâni's* daughter! Is it possible? Is there no remedy? Lateefun could never have willingly consented to this—never, never! Nor could my good aunt. It is all uncle's doing. All the work of my cruel, hateful uncle, who has now completely got the upper hand of poor auntie. Begum told me weeks ago that his word is law in the house now. What is to be done? Dare I make a proposal to Sadiq Ali? That would be useless—worse than useless. What chance of favour in the eyes of mercenary Sadiq Ali for an empty-handed petitioner? Mahir goes to him with silver and gold in his hands. Besides, the old monster hates me as he hated my father in former years. What am I to do? I have but one friend in the world, one *real* friend whom I can trust, and that is the Padre sahib; but how

speak to him, my dignified teacher, about a love affair? Impossible—quite impossible!'

And soliloquizing thus he went, with the inconsistency of youth, in the direction of the missionary's house. When he arrived there, after a walk of twenty minutes, he loitered irresolutely about the gateway for some time, looking in with wistful eyes; but catching sight of the Padre sahib in his garden, he lost courage and walked hastily away.

'I must think over the matter,' he reflected as he went homewards. 'There is only *one* way in which I can approach the Padre sahib in connection with an affair of this sort. Yes, I must think it out. There is *one* way, and only one, by which I can secure his powerful support;' and, much agitated, Abdulla went to his little room, but not to study, only to think about the immediate future.

Next morning, Abdulla, having ascertained that his uncle had really left Mozung for a time, presented himself at the *Moglâni's*. He had passed a night of mental torture, of anxiety and doubt. He looked so ill and so troubled in mind when he entered the house that his aunt, on seeing his haggard features, became much concerned about him. She made him sit down at once, and, while asking a hundred questions, busied herself immediately in preparing a refreshing sherbet for 'her dear son,' as she always called him.

Lateefun at once joined her cousin. She was shocked at his altered appearance, and when she tenderly asked him the reason of it, Abdulla said simply, 'Because I have not been able to see *you*';

and her heart gave a big jump, while her eyes filled with tears.

When they were alone for a moment, Abdulla blurted out with much emotion:

'What is this I have heard about Mahir Din?'

With downcast eyes, and in a low voice, Lateefun replied:

'Uncle is bent on my marrying him; but I won't!'

'What does auntie say?'

'Oh, she was very much against it at first, but uncle seems to have great influence over her now. He leads her as he likes.'

Abdulla felt like a drowning man.

'Lateefun,' he said, with a sudden effort, 'I am going to become a Christian.'

After a breathless pause, in which they stared at each other:

'Say that again,' requested Lateefun, with a gasp, her face becoming ashy pale.

He repeated the words with more deliberation, watching with intense anxiety the effect they produced upon her.

'Then let us both be Christians. Surely that is what you mean, Abdulla, isn't it?' said the impulsive girl, clinging to him. 'Save me, for God's sake, from Mahir Din and my dreadful uncle! The good God and the blessed prophet Isa (Jesus) will doubtless accept us.'

Her face was colourless; even her lips had lost their redness, and her large, lustrous eyes had grown larger as she looked earnestly into his face for an answer.

'It shall be so,' said Abdulla, drawing her slender figure to himself; and he sealed the compact on her cold lips.

The *Moglâni* came back with the sherbet, and a few minutes later was astonished to find what a marvellous effect it had had on Abdulla, who was quite cheerful, though rather excited in his manner. She did not know of the other cordial of which he had tasted, and the new hope, mingled with painful misgivings, which animated him now.

Though the resolution the lovers had come to was the hasty decision of a supreme moment in their lives, yet many influences had been at work shaping their characters and gradually preparing them for this crisis in their fates.

Abdulla had for years been silently drifting towards Christianity, aided and impelled by many subtle causes—the unsectarianism of his *Sufi* philosophy, the dreamy sentimentality of his nature, the religious teaching and personal kindness of the Padre sahib, and, not the least of all, the *Yogi's* fateful prophecy, which had, perhaps, suggested to him the thought that, as a Christian, 'the beloved' would be within his reach, a thought which had certainly dominated his mind since the death of Hakim Ali.

Lateefun, tender and sympathetic, the sensitive daughter of a proud but fallen race, had, under her lover's guidance, surrendered herself willingly enough to the infinite charm of Christ's large-hearted humanity, with its noble tenderness towards women. Indeed, she took up the new ideas with an enthu-

siasm which re-acted strongly upon her tutor, and carried him away in the same direction.

Thus it came about that these two young people, gradually fallen away from the faith of their fathers, stood that morning hand in hand prepared to face the world under the protecting shadow of the Cross.

CHAPTER XIV.

PREPARATIONS FOR FLIGHT.

AUTUMN chills were at length giving place to cool winter days, and Mozung, much quieter now than in the summer nights, was enveloped every evening in a shroud of white smoke. And through this smoke Begum tottered down the road, muttering to herself as usual.

A strident voice, shouting, '*Noor Allah! Sobhân Allah!*' smote the air, while the echo from the high walls of the houses which stood on the *maidân* repeated sharply the words, '*Noor Allah! Sobhân Allah!*' With earnest emphasis and persistent iteration came the words and their echoes, again and again, making the air vibrate.

'Can nothing be done to gag that d——d fanatic?' growled an irritated Englishman in a house in the neighbourhood.

But old Begum merely mumbled:

'Poor Sher Afghan! Robbed by death of his wife and children, he has turned to Allah for consolation. They say he has gone quite mad, and surely his mind is unhinged. But mad or not mad, *he*, at any rate, is a stanch Muslim, a very *Ghazi*; and while we hear

his voice we shall remember how terribly, for our sins, the angel of death visited our village during the fast of Ramazan.'

By this time she had come to an *ekka*-stand, and was halting irresolutely before a group of three or four of these vehicles.

'What is the matter, Begum?' said Mahir, who had been watching her for a minute or so. 'What are you grumbling about? Has anyone been cheating you?' And saying this, he drew her aside off the lane into a quiet recess.

'Never mind, Mahir Din; you go and look after your own *ekkas*, and leave an old woman like me alone.'

'But I saw you inspecting those *ekkas* in the lane; I am sure you want one. Won't you engage mine?' said the usually merry fellow in a low emphatic voice which betokened unwonted earnestness and anxiety. 'They are the best in Lahore, and *you* can always have them cheap.'

'What should I engage your *ekkas* for?' retorted Begum sharply. 'Am I going to run a race with the women of the city?'

'No, mother,' was the smiling reply. 'But as Mozung will soon be too hot for your mistress, you would like to run away—eh?'

'Who told you that?' asked Begum, trembling visibly.

'Don't try to conceal the news from me. Hell won't be hot enough for some people, I can tell you! I know everything, and so will others very soon.'

Saying this, he turned slowly as if to leave her. She followed him eagerly.

'Mahir, my son, tell me now—what have you heard?'

'I won't tell you. That is my secret.'

'Please do, good Mahir—do tell me what you have heard.'

'Well, then,' said he, speaking very slowly and with cruel emphasis, while he watched the effect of his words, 'I have heard that the English Padre sahib has made Abdulla an *Isahi* (Christian), and that the *Moglâni's* daughter has married the *Kafir* (infidel) very privately in the Padre sahib's house.'

'Oh!' cried Begum despairingly—'oh, that I should live to see this dreadful day! *Toba! Toba!* Is this known to everyone? Does the whole village laugh at the shame of my gray-headed mistress?'

'Not yet, but it will very soon; for I am just going to inform the *mulla* and the others about this damnable event; and then I am not the son of my father if that dog of a renegade will not have sufficient reason to repent of his apostasy.'

'For Allah's sake don't say anything about it, good Mahir! Tell no one about our disgrace till we are gone. Do help us, my son—do help us to get away! Yes, I know you will, won't you, Mahir?' said the aged servant, clutching his hand imploringly. Seeing that he was inclined to yield, she went on, still much agitated: 'Mahir, my son, do bring two *ekkas* round to our door at four o'clock at night. We have now little in the house to carry

away. Abdulla has removed them already. These are strange times we live in now. Allah has deserted my master's house entirely, and yet the young people laugh. Surely some madness has seized them!'

'Yes, that is quite apparent,' muttered her companion between his teeth.

'Will you bring the *ekkas*, Mahir Din?'

'I think I should first speak to the *mulla* about this very serious matter.'

'No, no — for old friendship's sake — for your father's sake—don't—pray don't!' said Begum, seizing his hands.

'Why did you reject my offer of *ekkas* a minute ago? And why are you so eager to have them now?' queried Mahir.

'Because I felt sure that, as a friend of the family, you would inquire *where* we were going and *why* we were going, and I feared to tell you the truth. But you know all, so help us to get away. Do, my son, help us to hide our shame.'

'How does the *Moglâni* like this business?' was Mahir's next question.

'Oh, she is heart-broken! Won't you come?'

'I don't like to—— I don't like mixing myself up in this disgraceful business at all.'

'Oh, do come!—do come, Mahir Din!' implored the aged servant. 'Do come!'

'Very well; for old times' sake, two of my *ekkas* shall be at your door at four o'clock before dawn. Is that the time you named?'

'Yes, yes! For God's sake, tell no one!'

As they parted a figure, emerging from a dark archway just behind the spot where they had been standing, hurried past them noiselessly. Begum thought she recognised Sher Afghan, and made him a low salaam; but the man went his way without returning her salutation or turning his face towards her.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MISSIONARY.

In a large and lofty room of his commodious, well-built house, which he loved to call his 'bungalow,' sat the missionary—Abdulla's Padre sahib—writing a letter to his brother in England. The room was not well furnished, but there was an air of comfort about it with its easy chairs, its tall bookcases and its ample, substantial writing-table, all clean and tidy, if not new or elegant.

The sole occupant of the room was an elderly man, stout and well-conditioned, with a decidedly benevolent expression on his big sunburnt face. He had taught and preached in India for five-and-twenty years, but though he had scattered the good seed of Christianity with an unstinting hand, he had not been able to garner any harvest of souls into the granary of his Master. It was true that he was respected by both natives and Europeans, in his little world, yet he felt, at any rate at times, that he had been an utter failure, not having succeeded in the special work which had brought him to India, for he was a conscientious man, and had tried his very best to bring the 'heathen,' as he called both

Mussulmans and Hindus, into the fold of Christianity.

But a brighter day had at last come for him, as we may learn from the letter which he was writing. It ran thus:

'My dearest Brother,

'At last, after my many weary years of conscientious if vain endeavour, it has pleased the Lord, in His great goodness, to permit me, His humble servant, to be the unworthy instrument of bringing two souls—and two such souls!—to the knowledge and appreciation of the great work of redemption. Yes, with the blessing of God I have been enabled to baptize into our holy faith two Muhammadans, a young man and a young woman. I thank God from my heart for the rescue from eternal perdition of these spiritual children of mine, and I rejoice greatly that it is to me He has vouchsafed the favour of bringing them to the foot of the Cross. I feel at this moment, dearest brother, that I have not lived in vain.

'I only wish you could see these young people. The man has been a pupil of mine for the past two years, a most upright, pure-minded youth, wonderfully free from the accursed bigotry which taints the faith of Islam and withholds so many promising young men from enlisting under the banner of our true faith. From the first day I saw this boy I was drawn towards him. I felt strongly as if he was in some way my own, though, after my past experience, I hardly dared hope he would be able one day to

commemorate with me, in the bonds of a common faith, the last supper of our gracious Saviour. But it is so. He is a Christian now—a true and sincere Christian if ever there was one, and—you will scarcely believe it—he has already won over to the cause of Christ the beautiful girl whom I joined with him in holy matrimony only to-day. Of her I personally know very little, but if ever a lovely face and exquisite form could add interest to a convert admitted into our holy Church, it would certainly be so in her case. Her manners are surprisingly self-possessed for one so very young, and she is decidedly well-bred. Abdulla, that's my young convert's name, assured me that she comes of a very aristocratic though much impoverished family.

'Unfortunately, both the baptism and the wedding had to be performed with the *strictest privacy*, as the young couple dreaded persecution at the hands of their co-religionists, but I invited a few European friends to be present on the occasion, as I knew *they* would be deeply interested in seeing these two young Muhammadans received into the Church of Christ.

'I have arranged everything very satisfactorily for my spiritual children, if I may call them so. They are to go to a missionary friend of mine at a small station not very far away, and stay with him, as secluded from the world as possible, until the inevitable storm blows over. In this case, both parties being of highly respectable parentage, although they are not blest with other worldly advantages, their conversion is sure to create a great

stir, and I shall have many cruel aspersions cast upon me for my humble share in this glorious work, but the great God who has assisted and blessed me thus far will sustain me to the end. There is no fear, dear brother, of any personal violence under our firm and upright Government, nor do I apprehend any such serious persecution of my spiritual children as would be likely to shake or disturb the faith they have professed.

'I am so full of this event, that I could go on writing pages about it, but I will defer saying any more just at present, and will let you know later on how the disclosure of the conversion, baptism, and wedding, is received by the native and European communities here.'

He read the letter aloud to himself, his face beaming all over; and having added the usual expressions of fraternal affection and goodwill, he closed, addressed and dispatched it to the post-office, in time for the weekly mail to England, which was going out that afternoon.

CHAPTER XVI.

DEVELOPMENTS.

WHEN Mahir parted from Begum, after promising to send his *ekkas* to the *Moglâni's* house at four o'clock on the following morning, he went home directly, and calling his younger brother aside, explained to him in confidence what he had learnt, and what he had engaged to do, adding:

'You must go with me to-morrow. I can trust no one else.'

'I'll be ready,' was the reply; 'but I can't see that there is anything to fear. We simply drive them to where they want to go, and, of course. need know nothing about their business or their doings.'

'You fool!' exclaimed Mahir hotly; 'do you think I am going to let the *Moglâni's* daughter lie in the arms of that accursed *Kafir* (infidel)—that son of a dog, Abdulla? No! by Allah and His Prophet! not if I lose my own life over it, or see her dead at my feet.'

These words, spoken in anger and incautiously loud, were overheard by Moradun as she was descending the steps to shut the street door, and made

the blood curdle in her veins. She was too afraid to listen, and hastily retraced her steps.

'What do you propose doing?' inquired Mahir's brother in a low voice.

'Well, in the first place, I shall put the *Moglâni* and her daughter into my *ekka*. Begum and their things can go in yours. We shall start in the proper direction, and when we get a mile or two into the country the wheel of your *ekka* must come off, your horse must become lame, you must yourself feel unwell, and you must insist on returning to Mozung to repair your *ekka*, change your horse, get medical aid for yourself, or whatever you like. What becomes of me is no business of yours. Our Muslim friends will, I am sure, stand by me, and see me safe through the business. Lateefun,' he went on, after a moment's pause—'Lateefun to be the wife of a hell-doomed apostate! By Allah! I shall bring her back to Islam or die.'

'This is a very serious business, I fear, Mahir; I don't like it at all,' said his brother.

'The risk is mine, and mine alone.'

'That may be or it may not; but I am very reluctant to engage in this wild plan of yours.'

'Then leave it alone, coward, and I will trust myself and my plans to one of my hired men.'

'There is no necessity for that,' replied the younger man meekly; 'I am always at your service, brother; but I cannot help thinking it is a mad and very risky adventure you are going to embark in.'

'Never mind that,' said Mahir sharply. 'Be ready at three o'clock, before dawn; or better, go

to sleep now, and I will wake you up in proper time.'

That night there were two persons at least in the house who had no sleep. Mahir was furious at being, as he considered it, outwitted and fooled by Abdulla, and he was equally enraged at what he thought was the deliberate treachery of Lateefun's uncle. He had revelled for weeks past in the thought of possessing the beautiful girl. He had improved and extended his house to receive her; he had in his vanity even imprudently hinted to some of his intimates that he was about to ally himself with an ancient and noble family. And now all his hopes and his pride were dashed to the ground. His disappointment and wounded vanity goaded him to madness, and never a wink of sleep did he have during that night. Nor did poor Moradun.

Long before two o'clock Mahir was stirring, and, waking his brother, instructed him to go to the stables and bring two *ekkas*, but *no groom*.

'Mind, two *ekkas*, but no groom, and let Sultan be harnessed in the better of the two traps. There will be some fun to-day,' said he savagely to himself when alone, as he got a few things together, and tied a long bag of rupees round his waist—'there will be rare fun.'

Moradun was on the alert as soon as the brothers commenced moving about, and, suspecting that something very unusual was going to happen, determined to find out, if possible, what it was. The words she had overheard drop from Mahir's angry lips had alarmed her very much, and had greatly

distressed her too, since it was she who had learned, in a most fortuitous manner, about Lateefun's conversion and marriage, and had told the news to Mahir, with hardly-concealed delight.

It appears that three or four days previously she had gone privately, under protection of her *burqa*, to the house of Mr. Baxter on purpose to pay her respects to little Daisy, to whom she was much attached.

'Moradun, why don't you become a Christian?' said the child, passing her white hand affectionately over the scar in Moradun's dusky cheek. 'A girl from your village became a Christian, and got married yesterday. My papa took me to her baptism and wedding at the Padre sahib's house.'

'Are you sure, miss sahib, that the girl was from *our* village?'

'I am not sure, but I think so; she was very pretty.'

'What was her name?'

'I don't remember. Oh, yes, I do. It was Lateefun.'

The child could give no further particulars; but Moradun, on following up the clue she had got by very cautious and secret inquiries, through some friends whom she could trust, about the movements of the family on the eventful day, fully satisfied herself that the Lateefun of whom Daisy had spoken was really the *Moglâni's* daughter.

In her natural exultation that her rival was quite out of Mahir's reach she hinted to him what she had learned, and now she was in an agony of terror and

anxiety as to what was going to happen. She would have given anything she possessed to have recalled what she had told Mahir.

'Oh,' moaned the girl, 'why did I speak to him about Lateefun! Why did this foolish tongue of mine tell him what I had found out? Oh! oh! what would I not give if my folly could only be undone!'

The words she overheard at night were alarming enough, and the sounds—*mysterious* sounds they seemed to her excited imagination—which were disturbing the quietness of the small hours, increased her anxiety as well as her curiosity.

Listening with all her ears, she heard the *ekkas* taken out of the yard as noiselessly as possible. After awhile she was aware of Mahir and his brother having left the house. Descending to the street, and peering cautiously into the gloom to ascertain if anyone was about, and seeing no one, she stealthily followed the brothers as they went in the direction of the *Moglâni's* house, which was not three hundred yards away.

The two men walked silently at the heads of their horses, Mahir's brother leading the way, and the only sound was that of the creaking *ekkas* as they passed over the ill-kept road. The rear *ekka*, to which Sultan was harnessed, had a very dimly-burning lantern hanging below it.

Moradun followed cautiously at a safe distance, keeping the dull light of the swinging lantern in view.

CHAPTER XVII.

DAWN.

THE poor *Moglâni* was being literally whirled along helplessly in a current of events too strong and headlong to be resisted by her; and Begum, though ever grumbling, would, with little hesitation, have followed her dear mistress to certain death. Lateefun—bright, self-willed, and self-reliant—ruled the house now that her uncle was away. It was clear that whither Lateefun led the other two would follow, in spite of conscience and in defiance of better judgment.

There was no time to lose. Abdulla, armed with a letter to a Christian missionary in a neighbouring town, had gone off by railway train to make arrangements for the reception of the family. The three women were to travel by *ekka* as privately as possible, to avoid observation and inquiry, since it is usually no light matter in India for persons of any social position to embrace Christianity.

Sleep was out of the question. A gloom hung over the two old women, but Lateefun, restless and excited, busied herself arranging their belongings for the journey. There was little enough left with

them, and that little had been tied up or otherwise disposed of by Begum and her mistress; but Lateefun, too wide awake to keep quiet, fidgeted about, arranging and re-arranging the things in the stillness of the night, while the elder women sat and dozed in the dim light of a single oil-lamp. From time to time the excited girl would address a remark to her mother or Begum after this fashion:

'Do you know, mother, that Abdulla cannot now have two wives? He can only have *one* wife, and that's me.'

'Begum, you shan't have so much work to do in *my* house. When my husband gets a good appointment you shall have nothing to do.'

To which observations the women would usually respond with a murmured blessing.

Suddenly a loud, harsh sound assailed their ears, making all three of them start. Lateefun laughed merrily as she recognised in it the discordant bray of their neighbour's donkey.

As the curtains of the dawn begin to be lifted ever so little, the half-plaintive, half-resentful bray of the donkey is one of the most noticeable sounds which greet the ear in many an Indian village. Awakened, perhaps by the shrill crow of the pampered cock, the uncared-for donkey, resting in the dust of the grassless plain, or the mud of the deserted street, opens an eye to perceive, alas! the signs of the approach of yet another day of cruel toil and brutal oppression. A painful shiver runs down his sore back, he tries to stretch his weary, aching limbs. He thinks, in his dull way, of the loads he will have

to bear upon his poor galled back, of the blows he will receive, and he puts his long ears back, opens his huge, ungainly mouth, and, with his eye on the whitening sky, breaks into hideous moans and curses.

Roused and warned by the unpleasant sound, Begum descended the stairs very cautiously to look into the night. Mahir, with his *ekkas*, had just arrived at the door of the house. His insatiable curiosity, his reckless disposition, and a feverish desire to have a finger in every affair, especially if it were a love-affair, would, in any case, have made him punctual to an engagement of this kind; but now he had a game of his own to play.

'You have come yourself,' said the old servant, peering into the blackness of the lonely street.

'Yes, mother; it is safer so. I am punctual, too.'

As he spoke the gong in the police-station struck four.

'On no account let the *Moglâni* or her daughter know that *I* am here,' whispered Mahir, as he slipped a silver coin into her hand.

She transferred it to her mouth for safety, saying:

'All right, Mahir Din; he took away most of our things yesterday. There is little to go with us now.'

'So much the better; we shall get on all the faster,' was the cheerful reply. 'Besides, I have harnessed my best horse for you—Sultan, who won the great race against the city people. You remember.'

It was pitch dark, and very chilly; not a sound

was to be heard. As silently as possible the few things that remained in the house were carried down the narrow staircase into the sepulchral gloom of the street below. The two old women, overcome with the painful feelings which oppressed them, were of little use at the moment; but Lateefun, in a state of nervous gaiety, was busy conveying the luggage to the *ekkas*, into which Mahir's brother stowed away the things. Lateefun had discarded her *burqa*—had she not adopted another and a freer creed?—and by the flickering light of the *chiragh*, which old Begum held in her hand, she looked the very embodiment of Eastern beauty, her long, dark eyelashes sweeping her flushed cheeks as she lowered her eyes before the man's unconcealed admiration of her charms. As soon as the things had been packed away, mostly in the receptacles beneath the seats, the *Moglâni*, tottering with premature infirmity, was helped to her place in the car. Lateefun was about to follow.

Mahir, who had been keeping in the background, came forward now. Lateefun gave a start when she recognised him, and clutched her mother's arm; but Mahir politely salaamed to the *Moglâni*, and said he hoped she was coming back very soon from her visit to her friends.

Both mother and daughter were reassured by his cool politeness. It was quite evident to them from his manner that he could not know anything about the recent events which they were so anxious to conceal for the present.

The situation was certainly somewhat compli-

cated, and very embarrassing. The reader will bear in mind that Begum, when she engaged Mahir's *ekkas*, had no suspicion of his matrimonial intentions towards her young mistress; that fact had been kept a secret from her. She knew that he was aware of the double conversion and marriage, but she had not spoken of this at home for fear of alarming the *Moglâni*, who was in a state of nervous terror about the facts getting abroad, and also because Mahir had bound her to secrecy.

Although Lateefun, lithe and active, could easily have mounted without help to her place alongside her mother, Mahir was officiously, and not too effectually, assisting her. He could not resist the temptation of touching the little beauty, whose scented clothes filled the air with perfume, whose warm breath was on his face, and whose witchery had penetrated into his very soul. His hand had stolen unnecessarily near the girl's breast, and she was modestly shrinking away from it, when the lamp which Begum had been holding up for the benefit of the party was rudely dashed to the ground, a violent push sent Mahir staggering against the wall of the house, in the impenetrable darkness, and in another instant Lateefun, with one faint but heart-rending cry, fell to the ground.

Lateefun's painful cry, followed by the piercing shrieks of the two old women, startled both the *ekka* horses, and before a restraining hand could be put upon him, Sultan, who had been impatiently pawing the ground, galloped down the narrow street in frantic terror, the creaking *ekka* bumping at his heels. Away

in the pitchy darkness bolted the terrified horse, till the *ekka*, striking against a doorstep, overturned with a crash, and Sultan himself was brought violently to the ground.

In the neighbouring houses the occupants were sleeping the light sleep which precedes the usual hour of rising, and were readily startled from their slumbers by the highly-disquieting sounds which seemed to suddenly spring out of the darkness. None of her neighbours had known of the *Moglâni's* intended flitting, so the noises which reached them were in every way inexplicable. Some minutes elapsed before a window near by was opened, and inquiring eyes peered from above into the dark pit below with suspicious caution and no little superstitious dread.

It was fully a quarter of an hour before a single person had the courage to come out to afford any help in response to Mahir's urgent appeals. At last a couple of hastily-prepared torches appeared to light the gloom. The scene they revealed was one of startling but pathetic horror. There, in the lurid glare of the flickering flambeaux, near the doorstep of her home, lay the dainty form of Lateefun in a pool of her own blood, which had also crimsoned the clothes of Mahir Din. The poor girl's upturned face was colourless, and she sobbed in cruel gasps. A hundred yards away was the wreck of the *ekka*, and the damaged horse entangled in its ruins. On the roadside, severely shaken and dazed, but not seriously injured, they found the *Moglâni* sitting, holding her head in her hands, as if to re-collect her

strayed senses. Not far from where the *ekka* was upset a woman was stretched utterly helpless in the middle of the roadway, with a severe bruise on her back; and a yard or two off lay a knife as sharp as a razor, both blade and haft covered with fresh blood.

All these details were dismally revealed by the dim torches, which threw fitful daubs of yellow light hither and thither, on wall, or road, or spectator, as the flames danced and fluttered in the breeze just coming up with the approaching dawn.

Mahir was dumfounded when he saw Moradun lying there with the bloody knife not six feet away from her; but he lifted her up gently, and, though torn by conflicting feelings, was pleased to find that she was not dead.

'After all,' he thought, deeply touched by her helpless condition, 'there is nothing like a woman's love or a woman's jealous hate.'

He would have asked her a dozen questions about her presence there and her motive for the deed, but there were too many people about, and he had to curb his tongue.

Moradun herself was too severely hurt to take an active conscious interest in what was going on around her.

Nobody would venture to render any real assistance when, surprised and awe-stricken, they found unmistakable evidence that a foul deed had been committed, for they dreaded deliberate misconstruction of their conduct on the part of their neighbours, or of the police, who had, of course, been summoned to the spot.

'It is an ugly business,' said the native police officer when he arrived on the scene with his constables; 'there will be many questions to answer.'

So he set to work to note down carefully all the facts that could be gathered then and there, and while he recorded these particulars on strips of yellow hand-made paper, the delicate girl lay writhing in her blood, untended. It was not until over an hour after she had received the cruel stab in her back that the officer gave tardy permission to her being carried into her old room, where she was laid on a bare mat near her favourite window to await the arrival of such skilled assistance as might be available. Mahir, his brother, and Moradun were taken off to the police-station.

The brown-leather volume, Lateefun's constant companion, which had fallen out of her hand, had been placed under her head.

'Mother, mother!' was all Lateefun's white lips could faintly articulate, as her eyes restlessly turned from side to side in search of her aged parent.

Presently she became more still, and her breath came in slower gasps between pallid lips, drawn into a sad curve as if she would cry; but not even that poor relief of distressed humanity was left to her, as she lay there with fading eyes fixed reproachfully on the tower of the abandoned Eedgah, just showing in the dawn.

From time to time her lips moved, and though the words she would have uttered, 'Mother dear, *don't* let me die—*don't* let me die!' were inaudible to human ears, the *Moglâni's* intense maternal love,

aided by the state of nervous exaltation in which she was, divined them with unerring accuracy, and they drove her to utter despair and madness.

What dream-shadows floated across the dying girl's weary brain; what illusions and delusions cheered or saddened those lingering moments of her life, who will ever know? It is certain that such images, whatever they might have been, and the tower of the Eedgah also, gradually faded from her human consciousness, as, perhaps, the watch-towers of another world came dimly, like dissolving views, before her spiritual vision.

In the end her young and innocent life passed silently away, while the morning air vibrated to '*Noor Allah! Noor Allah! Noor Allah!*' in crescendo tones, and the tormented echoes, like voices from the dead, answered back, '*Noor Allah! Noor Allah! Noor Allah!*'

'There is *no* Allah!' shrieked the *Mogláni* fiercely, kneeling with uplifted arms and clenched hands. 'There is *no* Allah—*no* Allah!' and, overcome by the violence of her emotions, she fell on the floor of the room in a dead faint.

The three or four persons who were present at the time, horrified by this rebellious denial of God, thought she was dead—struck dead for her mad blasphemy by the offended Deity—and dared not offer her any assistance.

Only Begum rose, and tottered helplessly towards the prostrate form of Lateefun's mother, exclaiming, with pathetic tenderness:

'Ah, my unfortunate mistress! Is *this* the end?'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MISSIONARY AGAIN.

In an easy chair in his comfortable room sat the missionary, with a gloomy and troubled expression on his large face, which bore evident traces of recent tears. On the table near him lay this unfinished letter:

'Oh, my dearest brother, one of the heaviest afflictions of my life has fallen upon me. Only the other day, full of delight, I wrote to you about the conversion of two most engaging Muhammadans, and now I have to record a fearful tragedy. In company with a European police officer I went last Saturday to view the most painful sight it has ever been my lot to witness. God grant I may never see another such sight again! I am so distressed and unnerved by what I saw that I can scarcely write about it even now.

'A horrible murder was perpetrated in the village which is named Mozung, and, of course, the story went like wildfire over Lahore. From what I heard of it, I feared it was connected with my dear spiritual children, and on inquiry my suspicions

were unfortunately strengthened. I went at once to a European police officer of my acquaintance, and found him on the point of proceeding to the scene of the tragedy along with a young friend of his, an artist, I think. He invited me to accompany them, and I went. At the door of the house we almost stepped into a pool of blood, which made my heart sick within me. All along the stairs were blood-stains; indeed, there was blood *everywhere*. On the floor, in the cold grasp of death, lay the dear girl I had joined in wedlock to Abdulla so recently. The deplorable scene was shocking beyond expression. As soon as the younger man saw her, I heard him whisper to the officer something like this:

'"By heavens! that is the very girl we nearly ran over some months ago; I have been trying ever since to get a photograph of her. What a cruel shame—what a dastardly crime! so young, so beautiful, even in death!"

'"It will prove to be a case of jealousy, I will be bound," remarked the officer with emphasis, and then, turning to his friend, he said, somewhat sternly: "I say, young man, I advise you very strongly not to mess about with your camera after pretty Eastern girls. You don't know what harm you may have done *even in this case*." These may not be his exact words, but what he said was to the same effect, and evidently he meant what he said.

'I would have offered up a prayer beside the murdered girl, but the officer would not allow it, and hurried me away. Perhaps he had his reasons.

'My first thought after leaving the scene of horror was to see about Abdulla. I hastened off, as soon as I could possibly do so, which was by nine o'clock in the evening, and took train to the mission-station to which I had sent him. I felt that the dreadful news should be broken to him with tenderness and affection. I thought, on the way thither, of the words I would use, and the manner in which I should gradually lead up to the painful event, which could not but spoil the happiness of the poor boy's life for ever afterwards. I came to the mission-station with a heavy heart to perform my sacred if most painful duty, but when I arrived at my destination I found that the news had, I know not how, preceded me by some hours. My reverend friend in charge of the mission there told me that when particulars of the horrid murder reached Abdulla he retired into the room which had been assigned him, and, begging to be left alone, locked himself in. My friend Mr. Jones (the missionary) was away at the time, but on his return home, he went to seek and console the unfortunate lad. He found the door open, and the room deserted. On the floor lay a lot of ashes, and a mingled and partially burnt heap of the leaves of some English and Arabic books, which, on inspection, were found to be the Holy Bible and the Koran. A boy employed on the establishment said that, attracted by the smoke issuing from the small window, he had peeped into the room, and observed Abdulla stirring up the burning paper with the bright blade of a very curious dagger with a sinuous

edge, which he held in his hand. He looked so strange and wild that the boy was glad to get away unobserved. Could anything be more pathetically tragic than this act by which the poor, distracted lad seemed to cut himself loose from the religions he had believed in, and the God—for there is but one God—who had seemingly deserted him? I can hardly bear to think of these awful events, but they naturally obtrude themselves upon me, and I often seem to see before me the quaint dagger gleaming in the light of that impious blaze, fed by the pages of God's holy Word. Somehow, too, a feeling of painful responsibility for these things presses intolerably upon me, till I cast my burden upon my gracious Lord, who has invited such as I now am to come unto Him. Yet my heart misgives me sorely, for Abdulla has not been heard of since his disappearance from the mission station.

'Another most painful feature of the case is that the poor girl has, I understand, been buried in the Muhammadan burial-ground with Muslim rites. This greatly aggravates the tragedy, and I was dissuaded from raising any objection only from dread of the unpleasant consequences which might arise from the fanaticism of the people.

'In this strange land where three religions meet, three well-established creeds—Christianity, Islam and Hinduism—with their respective histories, traditions, aspirations, and ritualisms, a perpetual contest, a fierce battle, is going on for the souls of men. The ancient faith of the land, notwithstanding its idolatries, seems to have an inexplicable hold upon

the great bulk of the people. Indeed, there are unmistakable signs of a great Hindu revival under the leadership, in some cases, of the very. men we have helped to educate. Islam, too, here as elsewhere always an uncompromising enemy of the Cross, claims the firm allegiance of many millions of the Indian people. The final issue is in the hands of God, and, as Christians, we cannot doubt what it will, what it *must*, be.

'The police investigation is going on. There is good reason to suspect that the cruel perpetrator of the murder is a woman named Moradun, a bad character. She is, or was, the mistress of one Mahir Din. Now, it has been ascertained that this Mahir had made an offer of marriage to Lateefun, and his mistress knew this, or at least suspected it, and was bitterly jealous of the poor girl. It appears that he went with his *ekkas* to the house of the murdered woman at a very early hour, long before dawn, and that Moradun must have followed him, and, watching her opportunity, struck the fatal blow, then ran off; but as God's justice would have it, she was not to escape the consequences of her wicked act. The dying shriek of the wounded girl so startled the *ekka* horse, which seems to have been an unusually spirited one, that it bolted down the road, and, in doing so, knocked the escaping murderess down. She was found almost insensible, from the shock of her collision with the *ekka*, and a bloody knife was lying near her. The woman has an old and ugly scar on her face, which, I dare say, she got under no creditable circumstances.

'The police think the evidence against her conclusive, and she will be brought to trial in due course. Everything necessary for a conviction is present—first the *motive*, her intense jealousy, which Mahir Din admits; then her presence, without any satisfactory reason, near the spot where the murder took place. She says she came out after the *ekkas*, from mere curiosity, which is, of course, absurd. And the bloody knife alongside of her—how can that be got over?

'I do hope the cruel murderess will get full punishment for her guilt.

'*Still later.*

'The Government prosecutor, it seems, has still another theory. He thinks that if Mahir Din knew of the conversion and marriage of Lateefun, he may, in a fit of fanatic jealousy, have killed her with his own hand. This, of course, is possible; but there is, so far, not a tittle of evidence to show that he knew anything about the conversion and marriage, which has not, even yet, been made public.

'I myself incline very strongly to the opinion that it was the work of his mistress, who might have thought he was going off with the girl whom she chose to consider her rival.

'The woman Moradun is inclined to be very reticent, and seems quite unable to give a satisfactory account of her presence on the fatal scene two hours before dawn, when no one in the village was astir.'

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INDELIBLE SCAR.

WHILE Moradun is in the hands of the police, and the various evidences of her crime are being collected and sifted, let us take a glance at some incidents in the history of this young woman.

She was born a Hindu, in the caste which is devoted to the tending of cattle, known as the *Gwala* caste, which had, in the foretime, by the banks of the sacred Jumna, provided many a willing maiden for amorous dalliance with the god Krishna. She was a hereditary *Gwalin*, or milkmaid, and like all Hindu girls, was provided by her parents with a husband while she was still quite a little child. Before she was eight years of age both her parents died, and before she was ten her boy-husband died also. A Hindu widow is a sort of social outcast, not entitled to any consideration, and she is not permitted to marry a second time. Thus, a mere child, was Moradun left friendless to face the world. But as she had hands, and could be useful, some people of her own caste gave her food and an occasional suit of clothes in return for her services in their dairy.

Nor were they hard upon her, or particularly ex-

acting, for these easy-going Indian people, not yet devoted to Mammon-worship, can live and let live in a way that would be incomprehensible and impossible amidst the strenuous and too selfish competition of Western lands. One of Moradun's duties was to take milk every morning and evening to the house of Mr. Baxter, living in the neighbourhood of Mozung.

The only child of the house was a dear, prattling, flaxen-haired girl of three, who always had something or other to say to the little milkmaid on her daily visits. One day, as the child was playing about alone, the *ayah* (nursemaid) having gone off to attend to something or other, a stray dog from the street came in and rushed furiously towards the terrified infant, whose screams attracted Moradun, then just entering the gate. Although a mere child herself, she flew to Daisy's rescue, and lifted her up in her arms; but the beast, which had been fighting outside and was furious, attacked her viciously, biting her severely in the leg. She, however, still pluckily held Daisy out of the dog's reach, and cried for help, which came as quickly as human feet could bring it, but not before the brave little milkmaid had had her face torn by the brute's sharp teeth. Only prompt surgical treatment saved the girl from serious disfigurement; but there remained a scar on her cheek not far from the ear, which she would carry to the grave.

Daisy never forgot the danger she had been in, and often, with her blue eyes widely dilating, would describe how the fierce dog had tried to get at her,

and how Moradun held her up above her head, although the beast was biting her legs. The plucky devotion of the milkmaid was never forgotten by the child, who ever afterwards was particularly attached to her humble friend, and would often stroke the scar with her soft hands, and say:

'My good Moradun, you did save me, but that horrid dog has marked you badly.'

'Never mind, miss sahib,' she would reply. 'I would rather the dog had eaten me up entirely, head and all, than that the brute should have hurt even a finger of your dear little hand.'

In the course of a few years Moradun developed into a fine girl, with a faultless form, and an exceedingly pleasant face, notwithstanding the scar, which, however, became less prominent as she grew to womanhood. As already mentioned, she, being a Hindu widow, could not marry again, and it may be superfluous to add that she was exposed to many temptations. Her natural joyousness of disposition, her wonderful voice and rare knowledge of Hindu songs, her love of flowers and of out-door life, and her taste for self-adornment, brought her many friends and more admirers. She was, indeed, a typical *gopi*, with strong passions and a yielding disposition. A creature of the sun, splendidly yet daintily developed, and nursed on the poetry of the *Gita* of Jeyedeva, redolent of flowers, warm kisses and panting bosoms in the soft Indian spring-time. This robust, healthy, and well-grown girl, a pagan, with all the natural sensualism of her race and country fostered and enhanced by the amorous songs and traditions of her caste, came

accidentally under the notice of Mahir Din. He admired her very much, paid court to her, and lavished money on her freely, with the result that she loved him with all the intensity of her warm nature, and to please him gave up the religion of her fathers and became a Muslim.

Their union, however, was of an irregular sort, though Mahir had solemnly promised to marry her when she had embraced Islam for his sake, and he was ever renewing the promise without fulfilling it. Of their later relations with each other we have seen something, till the time when the girl, passionately fond and jealous also of Mahir, was finally, but privately, installed in his house, ostensibly as a servant to his mother.

The recent events, which have been recounted in previous chapters, had brought Moradun into a very serious position, and she was now in the custody of the police — the evidence against her being of a most damning character.

As she walked slowly along, on the road between the gaol and the Magistrate's Court, handcuffed and at the end of a long iron chain, the other end of which was held by a policeman, Moradun felt that all the world had turned against her. In every face she encountered she read hostility and aversion. Even the children playing in the street fixed unfriendly eyes upon her, who had always been their darling. She felt in her dismal isolation and terror that she was being punished by the indignant gods whom she had dared to repudiate; and in her misery she vowed — for active religion is very

commonly a piteous cry for help, backed up by an oblation—that if she escaped from her present peril she would make, cost what it might, a suitable offering at the shrine of the potent goddess Bhadar Kâli, whose assistance she implored.

Her weary way from the gaol to the Courts just skirted her native village, and her despair reached its climax when she saw some of her young companions turn and run quickly away as they recognised her. One woman, however, stood to look at her, not without an expression of grave compassion on her face. She was Daisy Baxter's old nurse, who had known Moradun for some years, and well remembered the circumstances under which she had been scarred on the cheek.

Noticing the *ayah*, Moradun called out to her in husky, dolorous tones, and with the look of a hunted despairing animal in her beautiful eyes:

'*Ayah-ji*, tell Daisy *baba* to save me. The sahib can do everything.'

She could say no more, for the words stuck in her parched throat and her dry tongue refused to move.

Daisy's *ayah*, who was much affected by Moradun's situation and wretched plight, faithfully delivered her message to the child.

It was the first time that Daisy, now ten years of age, had heard of the dreadful crime, and overcome with emotion at the critical position in which her humble friend was placed, she flew to her father and, crying bitterly, begged of him to save the woman.

'How can I save her, Daisy dear, if she has committed so dreadful a crime?'

'Oh, she never did it! she never did! I am sure she is innocent!' pleaded the dear child. 'Papa, you *must* do something for her. *Won't* you, papa? She saved my life, you know.'

'Yes; she did, Daisy,' said Mr. Baxter, with much feeling, for he loved his little daughter dearly, 'and I will do my best for Moradun. There, don't cry; don't cry, dearest, I'll do my very best for her.' And he kissed the child—his only one—tenderly, and thought how wonderfully she resembled her dead mother.

He had passed his word to the child and he meant to keep it, but what could he possibly do to save Moradun, when, on inquiry, he found what good grounds there were for believing her guilty of the dreadful crime with which she was charged? He naturally disliked having anything to do with such an ugly case; but he had given his word to his little girl, and do something he *must*.

CHAPTER XX.

CONDEMNED.

LATEEFUN'S murder had at first excited a considerable amount of local interest; but that interest had begun to wane very quickly, for the *Moglâni's* little family, although well-known, was of small consequence in the village.

The suspected murderess was, in the eyes of most people, a doubtful character, being a deserter from Hinduism and yet only a half-hearted Muslim, if even that. Her engaging ways, her splendid voice, her pretty face and superb figure, her cheerful good-nature and utter unselfishness, had made her acceptable to the young of both sexes in the rank of life to which she belonged; but her relations with Mahir were strongly suspected and were referred to with stern disapproval by many a chaste matron or prudish dame in the village; and latterly, for some time prior to the murder, she had been practically lost sight of. But whatever Moradun's good qualities of head or heart might be, whatever her charms and her frailties, it was generally known that she was in prison, suspected of Lateefun's murder, and when the day appointed for the hearing of the

case came round, a score or two of people from Mozung attended the court to learn the result of the investigation, for the bright, happy girl had grown up in their midst, and they were not quite indifferent to her fate.

Moreover, some mysterious rumours had been going about concerning the murder, and mystery of any kind has always its attractions for many beside the idle.

Mahir Din was, of course, in the court; but trying to keep as much in the background as his feelings and his irrepressible curiosity would allow. Ajeet Singh was there also, looking pleased and important.

Mahir could not bear to see him strolling about complacently. 'Cruel brute,' thought he, 'to rejoice at the critical position of the poor girl!' and Moradun's devoted intervention in the fight came vividly to his memory; but the *mistree* would now and then pass by the spot where Mahir was sitting, and, glancing at him, would drop a cutting remark about the meanness and cowardice of some men. Mahir could not mistake Ajeet Singh's desire to annoy him, and his angry passions were rising fast when the magistrate entered and took his seat on the bench.

There was a general bustle in the court. Everyone stood up and pressed as far forward as possible. The officials and underlings began to look lively. After a short conversation, in low tones, between the magistrate, a police-officer, and a well-known pleader, the required prisoner was brought in.

A general murmur of astonishment filled the room

as a well-dressed, elderly Muslim, powerfully built, with a high aquiline nose and eyes like those of a hawk, was led up in the custody of half a dozen constables.

'Who is this?' asked one bystander of another.

'Who is this?' was the reply. 'Can't you see that this is Pir-ji, who stands daily calling upon Allah before the Waziri Musjid?

These words, spoken by no means in a whisper, and the prisoner's striking appearance, created a great sensation; and the question, 'What is he accused of?' was asked, with something of indignation, by many a Muslim there.

While the spectators were still exchanging inquiries in loud whispers, a young Hindu barrister, well known in the law courts, proceeded to examine certain witnesses who had been subpœnaed to give evidence in connection with the murder of Lateefun.

The room kept filling, and the proceedings were watched with intense interest.

Under the barrister's examination, conducted skilfully and deliberately, a Hindu skopkeeper deposed that at earliest dawn on the day on which the tragedy occurred, he saw the elderly Muslim, now in the hands of the police, with great stains of blood upon his clothes, slinking away in a very suspicious manner from the direction in which the murder had been committed.

The spectators listened with breathless attention.

Another witness confirmed the statements made by the Hindu shopkeeper.

It was next elicited from old Begum, now wasted and worn almost to decrepitude, that when she and

Mahir Din were arranging for the flight from Mozung, and discussing the circumstances under which it had become necessary, a man, who might easily have overheard their conversation, passed quickly out from the sheltering shadow of an archway alongside, and moved rapidly away. With great reluctance Begum admitted in a quavering voice that she had thought the man who passed her thus was the prisoner before her, who was no other than Sher Afghan.

A small shopkeeper next examined by the Hindu lawyer identified, by its very peculiar handle, a knife he had sold to Sher Afghan, and this was proved to be the very one found near the spot where the murder was committed. A policeman deposed that, hearing a peculiar grinding sound in the cabin where Sher Afghan lived, he had looked in, through a chink in the door, as he passed, and had seen the prisoner busily engaged in sharpening a knife. He was similarly employed when the witness passed back along the same way an hour later.

The witness stated that these occurrences took place on the night immediately preceding the murder.

As the evidence against him was being piled up, item by item, the prisoner, who had no one to advise him, was apparently suffering from extreme excitement. While the last witness was still being examined he suddenly, to the great astonishment of the court and those present, thundered out, '*Noor Allah! Noor Allah! Noor Allah!*' and then in excited tones he asked, still in a stentorian voice:

'Did any dog expect me to stay idle with folded arms when the widow of my only son had become a degraded *Kafir* (infidel), and had entered into unholy marriage with an infidel? *I* did the deed—I glory in it. *Noor Allah! Noor Allah! Noor Allah!*'

A peremptory command to restrain himself was only fuel to the fire of his excitement, and he went on, still speaking in high tones:

'I would have proclaimed this before—I am no coward: I would have declared it in the streets, I would have shouted it from the minarets, only I wanted Abdulla. My work was not done. But that clever, cringing dog of a Hindu' (pointing to the pleader)—'may he suffer in hell for ever!—has entrapped me too soon.'

This confession, and the manner of it, created an immense sensation in the court. It was the first time that the public had heard of the conversion of Abdulla and Lateefun to Christianity, and of their marriage. A bitter fanatical spirit soon manifested itself. Many of the Muslims present were agitated to a dangerous degree by the confession of the *religious motive* of the crime. As it was for Islam that the avenging knife had descended, not for any paltry consideration of gain or personal hatred, the cruel murderer before them was transfigured in the eyes of many of his co-religionists into a saintly personage. The news of the confession spread with astonishing rapidity, and the environs of the court-house were soon thronged with an excited multitude. Once aroused, the indiscriminating fanaticism of the Muhammadan crowd vented itself in insults to the

Hindus, as it was the evidence of Hindus and the forensic acumen of a Hindu which had contributed most to the establishment of Sher Afghan's guilt.

The dangerous cry, '*Deen, deen! Futteh Muhammad!*' ('The faith, the faith! Victory to Muhammad!') was raised by one excited Muslim, but quickly suppressed by his more cool-headed co-religionists.

Within the court the dignified presence of the English magistrate, the representative of imperial power, impartial justice, and strict religious toleration, ensured the maintenance of perfect order and decorum. But as he sat there dispensing justice, the Englishman was oppressed with a sense of weary indifference to the discords of these and all rival creeds.

For a moment only his face flushed and his pulse beat faster as the fanatic referred to the Christian converts as 'degraded infidels'; but having for long years been in almost daily contact with men both good and bad, both ignorant and educated, both mean and magnanimous, professing different faiths, and representing many old and alien civilizations, the religious circumstances of the case before him were unable to impair his mental balance, though, as one of the ruling race, he was not insensible to the contempt of the religion of his own people implied in the fanatic's words and actions.

Outside the court-house a collision between Hindus and Muslims seemed imminent. Angry words were bandied about, and the irrational, fanatical hatred of both parties was rising to a dangerous heat. Ajeet Singh did not trouble to

conceal his pleasure at the result, and had there been any collision between the Hindus and Muslims his stalwart form would assuredly have borne its full share, and more, in the conflict. But the police guards were hastily doubled, and this show of firmness, together with the presence of a couple of English police officers, who were promptly on the spot, served, happily, to prevent any overt act of turbulence, and the prisoner was removed to the gaol without the occurrence of any serious breach of the peace.

Strange as it may seem, the unexpected turn which the case had taken was due largely to the pleadings of a little English child. Though Mr. Baxter did not feel inclined to meddle in Moradun's behalf, he could not efface from his memory the service which she had once rendered to his little daughter, and Daisy would not let him forget his promise to help the woman in her trouble. On consideration of the circumstances of the case, Mr. Baxter had concluded that the best, in fact, the only way in which he could help the woman was to give her a good legal adviser, and so he engaged a clever and rising young native lawyer, a Hindu named Ramnath, to conduct Moradun's case, and afford her assistance.

Ajeet Singh, although much disappointed and disgusted at Moradun's behaviour during and after his fight with Mahir Din, still, with the generosity of a fine character, had felt keenly for the poor girl in her dangerous position. He would allow no one to speak ill of her, and stoutly maintained her inno-

cence, notwithstanding the strong evidence against her. When he came to know that the barrister Ramnath was interested in Moradun, he aided him in every conceivable way.

'The child could never have done it,' he would say. 'Have I not known her since she was *so* high,' placing his hand a foot above the ground.

Under Ramnath's clever management, aided by Ajeet Singh's local knowledge and deep interest in the girl, the case began gradually to assume a new complexion. Evidence was privately obtained which under other circumstances would not have been forthcoming. Hindus, who had feared to mix themselves up in an affair which seemed to belong exclusively to Muslims, now ventured, under the ægis of the English sahib and the well-known lawyer, to privately proffer, though not without trepidation, their evidence in the case, with the result which we have already seen.

What Moradun's fate would have been but for her chance meeting with Daisy's *ayah*, we need not conjecture. The villagers, when they subsequently talked about it, said: 'The girl's *kismet* was good,' 'Her hour had not come.' And perhaps this sufficiently sums up the philosophy of the matter as far as we are permitted to fathom it.

CHAPTER XXI.

THANKSGIVING.

By Sher Afghan's full and particular confession Moradun's innocence was established, and she was formally released from the custody of the police. The moment she was free she hurried off, with her veil drawn well over her face, and, taking a circuitous route to avoid observation as much as possible, went to Mr. Baxter's house. It was evening by this time, and the sahib was in his little garden with Daisy attending to a number of favourite roses, which were his especial care and pride. He was not yet aware of the turn the case had taken, when suddenly Moradun approached, and, falling on her knees before him, bowed her head down to his very feet in grateful acknowledgment of his kindness. In words choked by sobs she poured out her thanks from the very bottom of her heart. She kissed little Daisy's hands a hundred times, and the warm-hearted child was moved to ready tears, while rejoicing that she had been the means of saving the good woman from a dreadful fate; for, humanly speaking, Moradun would have been condemned and executed, had it not been for the astute

Hindu pleader, who traced the guilt of the crime to the fanatic Muslim.

'I knew you would never do such a horrid thing,' said Daisy, overjoyed to see her humble friend. 'I am so glad you told the *ayah* to speak to me.'

'You were the only one who believed in me, miss sahib,' sobbed Moradun, stroking the child's hands.

'Oh, no; the sahib was also sure that you were innocent. Were not you, papa?'

Mr. Baxter regarded the glowing face of the grateful young creature with some attention, and ran his eyes, as men will do, over the soft contours of her faultless figure, not without very natural admiration.

'Of course, Daisy; I felt sure that she was innocent,' he said, highly pleased that he had been able, however indirectly, to rescue her from such very serious danger. Then, addressing Moradun, he said: 'You have really to thank the clever lawyer and your friend the Sikh *mistree* for your escape; they worked for you with great earnestness.'

'May God bless you and yours, sahib,' said the girl with deep feeling, and she took her leave, Daisy running as far as the gate with her.

Her first obvious duty thus fulfilled, Moradun's mind was perplexed by a serious question which presented itself to her—Where was she to live now? and this point engrossed her thoughts as she left Mr. Baxter's house that evening with five rupees in her hand.

Would Mahir care for her again after all that had happened? Could she, on her part, forgive his suspicion of her, and his cold indifference to her

fate? He had given her no help or comfort of any kind in her time of trouble, and his unkindness had deeply wounded her. It pained her keenly to reflect that he could have been amongst those who had looked upon her as an inhuman murderess.

Influenced by these feelings, Moradun, instead of going to Mozung, on leaving Mr. Baxter's house, lowered her *burqa*, and under its protection went to the Anarkali bazaar, where she provided herself with a *saree*, as she wished to put off her Muslim attire for reasons of her own.

The dreadful mental anxiety through which the young woman had passed since the morning, six weeks previously, on which poor Lateefun fell a victim to the knife of the assassin, had quite unnerved her. Her natural boldness and confidence had entirely deserted her. She was in such a state of depression that she dreaded meeting anyone she knew.

Mahir Din, as has already been stated, was in the court-house when Sher Afghan proclaimed his own guilt. The excitement that followed that public and fanatic avowal found in him an eager participator. Between his detestation of the murderer of Lateefun and his hereditary, if unreasonable, hatred of the Hindu, he was in a strange state of mental bewilderment. Absorbed in the events around him, he had not noticed Moradun's release, though he had rejoiced greatly to find that she was innocent of the foul deed.

The tragic event and the subsequent investigation had not been without serious influence on Mahir Din. The cruel scene he had witnessed was seared into

his very brain, never to be again effaced. His buoyancy of disposition was permanently affected by what he had witnessed, and by the critical position in which he had been temporarily placed, while his entire character was modified, for good or evil, by the shock his mind had sustained.

He loitered about the court-house, which seemed to have a disagreeable fascination for him, and he did not leave the place till the convict had been removed by the police, and the crowd had almost dispersed. He then bethought himself of getting home, where he made sure, with a thrill of selfish satisfaction, he would find Moradun, towards whom he experienced a strong feeling of genuine tenderness and pity now that her complete innocence had been publicly established.

Moradun, however, after having, as already stated, provided herself with a *saree* in the bazaar, avoided her native village, and just skirting it, took the road to Ichra, about two miles away on the Ferozepore road, along which the *ekka* race described in a previous chapter was run.

Her feelings of gratitude to the gods who had rescued her from imminent peril had full sway over her emotional nature, and she was resolved to carry out, without delay, the vows she had made in her hour of trouble.

Although she had made an open confession of her conversion to Islam, yet, in her inmost heart, her faith in the old deities of Hinduism, who had watched over her childhood and a hundred generations of her people, remained practically unshaken.

She recalled to mind that it was just when she had promised to make a votive offering at the shrine of Bhadar Kâli that she had come across Daisy's *ayah*, and she felt that the meeting was a providential one which she owed to the magnanimity of the beneficent goddess.

The temple of Bhadar Kâli was, however, too far away to be conveniently reached before nightfall, but as Moradun did not wish to sleep in Mozung that night she resolved to make her way to the substantial village of Ichra, which lies about half a mile beyond the temple of the god Bhairon.

Her object was to present an offering at his temple in the early morning, and then to make her way across country to the fane of the goddess Kâli, at Niaz Beg, avoiding the beaten tracks as much as possible.

Skirting Mozung on the western side, she took, as already stated, the Ferozepore road, and, walking rapidly, she soon passed on her left the toll-house, where a large number of carts, heavily laden with firewood, were drawn up. Moradun hurried along, lest she might be recognised by any of the drivers, forgetting in her anxiety that the *burqa* which she still wore afforded an impenetrable protection against prying eyes. The road, an excellent and well-kept one, now lay between green fields of wheat, cotton, and Indian corn. She crossed two bridges over the almost dry beds of natural watercourses, and presently found herself in a region of brick-kilns, which extended for a long way on both sides of the road. By this time the fine gilded finial

surmounting the tall steeple of Bhairon's temple glittered before her in the setting sun. In a few minutes she came up to and passed the pagoda on her right, and, leaving the highway, proceeded along an unmetalled road leading to the village of Ichra, which, to judge by its fine tall houses, was a decidedly prosperous place. For about half a mile further she trudged along amidst a wilderness of lime-kilns till, at length, she reached one of the gates of the village.

By the time darkness settled over the country she had found a lodging for the night. The temple, with its lofty pointed steeple, its high and massive sloping Egyptian-like walls, and its strong enclosure, lay within easy view of the place where she had found temporary accommodation.

Shortly after dawn the next morning, dressed in her new *saree*, Moradun presented herself at the large gateway of the sacred edifice. The massive doors were wide open. To the temple a small monastery is attached, ruled by a *mahant* or abbot. The monks here are of the *Yogi* order, and several of them, comfortable-looking and well-fed specimens, including visitors from other monasteries, were hanging about the gate when Moradun came up to it.

Many persons, mostly women from Lahore, were already there, for it was Sunday, the day of the week specially appointed for worship at this temple. There were also numbers of vendors of bread, cakes, and sweetmeats, and quite a congregation of miserable dogs who had come from the neighbouring hamlets to be fed on bread and unsubstantial

sweets; the feeding of these dogs being a regular preliminary to worship in the temple.

Moradun, like the rest, bought some bread and cakes and threw them to the dogs, who were as well-behaved as misery and starvation would allow. She then purchased some sweetmeats and a tiny terra-cotta lamp, provided with a cotton wick and some clarified butter. This was lighted for her, and she carried it through the big gateway, and across the open courtyard to the shrine. In the porch she rang the brass bell, which hung by an iron chain from the ceiling, and then, approaching the door, knelt down devoutly. With loving hands she pressed the threshold as if it were a limb of some living thing, and she murmured with great feeling her thanksgiving for her escape from the difficulties and dangers in which she had recently been floundering helplessly. After that, she entered the cella beneath the lofty steeple, and there deposited her tiny lamp and simple offering. No idol was to be seen in the shrine, only in the centre of the room stood an octagonal pillar, about three feet high, surmounted by a flat dome. In the upper part of this pillar was a recess in which a brass lamp fed with clarified butter was kept burning perpetually day and night. A portion of the cella was occupied by a sort of masonry safe with a small door. On the face of this safe some one had pasted a picture in crude colours of the god Bhairon, with his club on his shoulder, attended by a dog. The picture, from an artistic point of view, was contemptible, but, after all, 'the best of this kind are shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them.'

After entering the cella, Moradun bowed her head down to the ground several times before the pillar and its burning lamp, murmuring her grateful thanks to God. As she rose to her feet, she received from an attendant in the shrine a thin garland of sweet-scented white flowers. Before leaving the place she raised her hand above her head, and rang the bell suspended there. She backed out of the room, rang the bell in the porch once more, and regained the open court.

When she had left the consecrated enclosure by the big gateway, she betook herself to the shelter of a clump of plum-trees, prettily grouped about a well in an adjoining field. Here she entered into conversation with some women who had come from Lahore, to whom she mentioned her intention of going over to Niaz Beg. They fell in with the idea very readily, and a party of four was formed to proceed thither in the afternoon. It was expected that they would easily get *ekkas* at Niaz Beg to take them back to Lahore before nightfall.

When the afternoon was somewhat advanced the party started on their way across the open fields, a distance of about five miles, to the temple of the goddess Kâli. It was a cheerful, gossiping company of women, the youngest of the party being Moradun, who was beginning to recover her natural buoyancy of spirits in the open air of the fields, and away from the scenes which were associated with her recent misfortunes.

The world, which but a day before was a sombre, unsympathetic world to her, now began to assume

a new aspect. The sunlight seemed brighter than ever, the herbage more verdant; the birds and flowers were taken back into her affections. All nature appeared friendly, and the girl was glad once more, so true is it that the mind makes the world for each one of us. And the day was indeed beautiful. The torrid summer, the sodden heat of the rainy season, and the damp chilly autumn, had now given place to the wonderfully invigorating winter of Upper India, with its mild sunshine and crystal-blue skies.

From very joy Moradun, to the delight of her companions, trilled aloud a hymn of praise of the season, with much feeling in her always melodious voice. The other women joined in to the extent of their abilities, and the little party went cheerfully on its way, singing and talking gaily. Under the influence of her revived spirits, and in the fulness of her heart, Moradun went so far as to confide to her companions the story of her recent dangerous position.

They listened to her with interest, not unmingled with disquietude, and though they expressed sympathy with her, were in reality alarmed by what she had told them, and, naturally enough, began to look upon her as a suspicious character. When opportunity offered, they exchanged glances and whispers with one another about the undesirability of being seen in her company. They were respectable women, and their respectability naturally shrank from contact with one who, according to her own statement, had actually been accused

of murder, and had been in gaol; but they were kind-hearted, too, and hesitated to give her pain.

As they walked across the unfenced country towards Niaz Beg, the party of women, now a little less lively, was followed, at a respectful distance, by one of the *Yogis* who had been loitering about the gate of Bhairon's temple when they visited it. He was a strong, lusty young fellow, with a sensual, cunning expression of countenance. Nature had given him a narrow head, sloping to a ridge, small shifty eyes which squinted slightly, a large mouth, and receding chin. His ears, naturally prominent, looked bigger now, sticking conspicuously out of the sides of his clean-shaven head, as thick jade rings, not less than two inches in diameter, had been passed through great slits in their cartilaginous portions. These huge disfiguring earrings were outward and visible signs of the monastic order to which he belonged.

The four women trudging across the fields, absorbed in their own conversation, had not noticed the young *Yogi* sneaking after them like a detective, and had pursued their zigzag way to Niaz Beg ignorant of, and untroubled by, his movements. Having arrived there, they betook themselves at once to the grove in which stands the great tank belonging to the temple, in order to purify their persons before presenting themselves at the shrine of the goddess.

The scene which met their eyes as they passed the gateway was charming in its quiet, unpretentious beauty. The most prominent object was an exten-

sive square tank of brick-masonry, fed with fresh water from a wide aqueduct occupying the centre of the grove, which was itself surrounded by a high wall. A series of steps built round the entire tank led down to the water, and no doubt quite to the bottom. Three of these steps were above the water, which sparkled invitingly in this splendid reservoir, faithfully reflecting, as in a perfect mirror, the images of four elegant white buildings which stood quite at the edge in the middle portion of each of the four sides. Within one of these buildings—the one on the western side—was the women's bathing-place, into which the water of the tank found its ready way through a perforated wall serving as a dainty screen for the bathers within. The other buildings round the tank were designed apparently for the convenience of loungers who might wish to enjoy the coolness of the grove and tank, especially in the warm summer-time, when the sun asserts himself so terribly in these tropical lands, compelling all nature to dreamy, languorous repose.

As the four women reached the tank a man was standing on the top of one of the buildings at a height of about twenty-five feet above the surface, just about to make a plunge into the water. He poised himself a moment, his stalwart figure projected sharply against the blue sky, and then sprang through the air, descending feet foremost into the water. He hardly sank beneath the surface when he reappeared, striking out with easy vigour for the opposite side. The sun glinted gaily on the great ripples which he made as he moved rapidly across

the tank under the eyes of the women; but Moradun, drawing her *chudder* closely over her face, retired hastily into the seclusion of the women's bathing-place; for she recognised in the swimmer one Sham Lal, of her native village, an idle gossip of bad character, and had no mind to attract his attention, particularly there, in the precincts of a Hindu temple. Her companions, declining the cold shelter of the women's bathing-place, and preferring the genial warmth of the sun outside, unrobed in the open, and descended quickly into the water, naked but not ashamed; nor was there the slightest suggestion of immodesty in this act of theirs, sanctioned as it was by immemorial custom. The young *Yogi*, from the pavilion on the opposite side, watched them, unseen himself; but he looked in vain for Moradun, who was the especial object of interest to him. Presently, however, having had her bath, she joined the other women, and the four proceeded together to the temple.

The fane itself, a small octagonal and domed building, stands within another structure of moderate size and no architectural pretensions. The function of the larger construction seems to be to provide a covered way round the shrine for the circumambulations of worshippers. Its ceiling is hung with about a hundred good-sized brass bells, the present of a pious merchant, who placed them there in gratitude for the assistance given him by the goddess in bringing an important law-suit to a successful issue.

The four women, in single file, entered the veranda, and touching, as they passed, the bells depending in rows overhead, proceeded to the door of the shrine. A strong odour of incense pervaded the air, proceeding from a quaint metallic brazier placed before the presiding divinity, who was quite invisible, buried under a heap of flowers and coloured clothes. The image of the goddess must have been very diminutive, in fact, merely a tiny doll; but her power was known to be great and far-reaching. Behind the unseen goddess a background of strange shapes in marble represented some attendant celestials, amongst whom the form of Hanuman, the monkey-god, was easily recognisable. Moradun's companions bowed their heads before the deity concealed beneath the flowers, and passing round the shrine once only, left the temple by the door through which they had entered. Theirs was an ordinary visit, but Moradun's devotions, it is needless to say, were of a special nature, and not to be so quickly disposed of. In her gratitude she lay prostrate for some minutes in the cella, pouring out her thanks to the merciful goddess, and then she circumambulated the shrine nine times, that being the highest number permissible.

When Moradun emerged from the temple she began looking about for the women who had accompanied her, but none of them were in sight.

The young *Yogi* who had shadowed the party from Bhairon's temple now stepped up to her, in a careless sort of way, and said:

'You are looking for your friends, I suppose. They have gone off in *that* direction,' pointing with his hand, 'to secure an *ekka* to carry them to Lahore.'

He had overheard the conversation of the women as they left the temple, bent on giving Moradun the slip; he did not, however, direct her on the right road, but very much away from that which they had really taken.

Moradun wandered about for some time, when the *Yogi*, who had been watching her, came up and said:

'What are you doing here? Your friends are tired waiting for you in the *ekka*—they are just on the road, and I said I would call you.'

'This is a great favour, Maharaj,' said the girl, flattered by his attentions, and, without hesitation, set off with him in the direction he indicated.

By the time Moradun and the *Yogi* had got out of ear-shot of the temple, darkness closed in upon them, and the jingle of an *ekka*, a long way off, coming towards them from the direction of Lahore, was distinctly audible in the still night air.

'Oh! there's an *ekka*,' said the girl, much delighted. But the *Yogi*, suddenly seizing her by the wrist, forced her off the road.

Moradun, much astonished, remonstrated and tried to free herself from his grip; but he held her firmly and hurried on till, terror-stricken, she called aloud, or rather shrieked for help, while the *Yogi* literally dragged her along with a strong hand. The

ekka, whose jingling bells they had heard, stopped, and a voice which she at once recognised as Mahir's shouted:

'What's the matter? What's the matter? Moradun! Moradun, is it you?'

Her cries became still more shrill and more distant as she was hurried forcibly away. Mahir jumped out of his *ekka* and, leaving it on the road, followed in the direction of Moradun's voice. In the darkness he stumbled and fell several times, for he was in a state of great excitement, particularly as the girl's cries for help were getting more remote and more feeble. Presently all was quite still. He shouted, but no one replied. He shouted again and again; he called her by name, but not even an echo answered.

What did it all mean? What could have happened to the girl?

Returning with all haste to his *ekka*, Mahir drove, as fast as the horse could go, to invoke the assistance of the priests attached to the temple; but they received their Muhammadan visitor very coldly.

'Go and help her yourself,' said one truculent fellow. 'We are not going out into the night to be murdered by a lot of ruffianly Mussulmans.'

'A very fine story indeed,' said another derisively, with the end of an opium pipe between his teeth. 'If a murder has been committed we shall perhaps know where to find the murderer,' and he looked significantly at Mahir.

Barely out of the grasp of the police, this pointed remark gave such a scared, even guilty, expression to Mahir's face, that the priests, whose suspicions were now excited, determined to take special note of him and his *ekka*, before they would consent to his going away. Once more on the road, Mahir stopped as nearly as possible in the spot where he had first heard Moradun's cries. He raised his voice in loud, prolonged shouts, calling to her by name, but the only answer he got was the hideous howl of the ill-omened jackal.

After his reception at the temple, Mahir did not dare to ask the assistance of the villagers of Niaz Beg, but, quite overcome with anxiety and worry, he returned to Lahore.

Let us see now how it happened that Mahir was at hand when Moradun was thus abducted by the young *Yogi*. It appears that on the day of Sher Afghan's confession, Mahir, as soon as the excitement in the court had subsided, went home as quickly as he could. He made sure of meeting Moradun there. The unexpected turn which the case had taken made him painfully conscious of his gross injustice to her, and he was half-ashamed to face her. He had always been very fond of the girl, but his own temporary danger and her apparent guilt had, as it were, dazed his mind and paralyzed his affections. Now, however, under the altered circumstances of the case, the trouble and unmerited suffering they had both recently passed through made her more dear than ever to him, and he longed to obtain her forgiveness,

and to unburden his whole heart to her. He was also not without curiosity to find out how and why she had been near the *Mogláni's* house that eventful morning before dawn, and why, during the judicial inquiry, she had not given any explanation of her presence there. Had she gone out to meet anyone? Could she have gone out to meet the Sikh *mistree*, Ajeet Singh? The thought forced itself upon his suspicious nature, but he did not at this moment wish to entertain it.

At home he could get no information about Moradun, as she had not presented herself there, and Mahir had to retire to his bed in a very disturbed frame of mind, wretched and miserable, for his expectations and hopes had been baffled and disappointed once more.

With earliest dawn he set about endeavouring to find out where she had concealed herself. He learnt, in the afternoon, from some persons who happened to have seen her, that she had gone on the previous day towards Bhairon's temple. He followed her there, and, on inquiry, ascertained that a woman answering to his description had gone, with three or four others, across the fields to Niaz Beg. Thither he proceeded at once in the hope of finding her, with what unsatisfactory result we already know.

The whole of the following day Mahir spent in search of Moradun, now maddened by the desire to bring her home, though a secret dread lurked in his heart that she had perhaps been murdered, and that his eagerness to trace her might be misunderstood,

and eventually bring undeserved suspicion on him, as it did with the priests at Niaz Beg.

Between his desire to find her, and his fears about her safety and his own, Mahir was utterly miserable, and so distracted that he could not carry out his search for the girl on any plan likely to lead to success. He had not dared to tell anyone, not even his mother, of his adventures at Niaz Beg, and his suspicion, nay, his conviction, that the voice he had heard crying for help was Moradun's.

CHAPTER XXII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

DAY followed day in weary succession without bringing any tidings or any trace of Moradun.

Mahir had gone out to look for her—this being now the all-absorbing business of his life.

His mother sat at home spinning cotton, and wondering when her son's foolish infatuation would pass away.

'I am glad the girl has not come here,' she said to herself; 'for she certainly is not wanted by *me*. If she did not commit the murder, she must have gone out to do it; that is plain enough, or why was she there? Besides, she has too much influence over Mahir—far too much. How they used to laugh and sing together, by the hour, banging away on the *tubla*, and not a word or a thought for *me* the whole time. Then she would dance, too, making her belled anklets tinkle like a very *kinchinee* (harlot), and laugh in my face when I scolded her. And, gracious Allah! the excuses he used to make for her idleness and carelessness. Why, the boy was bewitched by that Hindu trollop. The house is well rid of her. There is no room for *her* here. His

wife shall be a young girl who can be properly trained, a well-brought-up girl of good Muslim stock like Ameerun, who will soon be fourteen, and knows how to respect and *obey* her elders.'

As she thought thus, spinning cotton thread, seated near the window, someone just outside the door of the room said, in a deprecating sort of way:

'Bibi sahib!'

She turned her head, but did not answer.

'Bibi sahib! may I come in?'

'Come in,' said the old woman in a far from friendly tone, for she recognised Moradun's voice. 'Oh! it is you,' she remarked coldly, as the girl stepped in and fell at her feet. 'You have apparently been doing a little wandering about on your own account, enjoying yourself after your release from gaol!'

'I have suffered much, bibi sahib, God knows!' said Moradun, with a choking sensation in her throat, as she looked about the familiar place and well-known surroundings.

'Yes, *God* knows! but what has brought you here, now?—it is several days since you were released from prison.'

'I have come because I wanted to see you, bibi sahib, and the place where I spent so many happy days.'

As she spoke a white cat came up, and rubbed herself affectionately against Moradun.

'Oh, Jumni! do you know me, and love me still? said Moradun, touched by the cat's affectionate recognition of her. '*You* don't despise me because

it was my evil *kismet* to see the inside of a *jail khannah*—do you?' and she stroked Jumni tenderly. 'I committed no fault—you know that?' she went on, still speaking to the cat, who by this time had made herself comfortable in the girl's lap.

Mahir's mother took no heed of these remarks, which she felt were specially intended for her, but preserved a chilling distance of manner, answering curtly, and with studied indifference, the many questions which Moradun put about friends and neighbours.

She made no allusion whatever to her son, so at last Moradun, unable to contain herself, ventured to ask hesitatingly, and with her face almost buried in Jumni's soft fur:

'Has not your son spoken of me?'

'My son has not spoken about you lately,' was the cold, and by no means truthful, reply.

Moradun, though she did not quite believe the old woman, was abashed into complete silence.

'Look here,' said Mahir's mother, 'take down that bundle from the *tâk*' (shelf).

Moradun obeyed, and, in doing so, her veil fell back, for the shelf was a high one, and both her arms were exposed, displaying a gold *kurra* on each wrist.

'What's that you have got on?' inquired the old woman sharply, her curiosity excited by these costly ornaments, of quaint, antique pattern. Let me see,' and before the girl could cover them with her *chudder*, as she tried to do, Mahir's mother caught her hand, and made a full and satisfactory inspection of one of the bracelets, and then of the other.

They were old and very substantial articles, apparently worth a good round sum of money.

Still holding the girl by the arm, 'Who gave you these?' she asked.

But Moradun, ignoring the question, stammered out:

'Shall I open this bundle for you, bibi sahib?'

The girl's manner was so confused and awkward that bibi sahib, who stared very hard at her, drew her own conclusions, and then replied in incisive tones:

'Oh, no; it contains only the things that were given to you in this house, and I want you to take it away, that's all.'

The girl rose to her feet. Her pride was deeply wounded, and, salaaming low, she asked permission to go.

'*Salaam*,' said the old woman, adding sarcastically, 'May you be prosperous in your new calling. Your belled anklets will be useful to you, I think; you had better take them.'

Moradun turned to leave the room, and the bundle she had taken off the shelf lay uncared for on the floor.

'Won't you take your things away?' asked Mahir's mother.

But the girl did not heed her, and literally fled away, with a dull pain in her heart.

* * * * *

When Mahir came home that day he was told that Moradun had been at the house.

'Yes; and where is she now?' were his eager words when he received this piece of news. And, as he uttered them, he moved, with expectancy on his face, towards the door of the room she had formerly occupied.

'Oh, she is not here,' said his mother; 'she came, but she went away again.'

'Why did you let her go? Why did you not detain her till I returned home?'

'She would not stay.'

'What nonsense! Would not stay?'

'Yes; I tell you she would not stay. Was I to tie her feet with a rope and keep her here?' replied the old woman tartly.

'No, mother; don't get vexed, but tell me all about her; I fancy her feelings are deeply wounded. Poor dear, how is she looking?'

'Well enough.'

'Go on.'

'Well, she came here, and the first thing she did was to fall at my feet and cry most bitterly.'

'Poor thing!'

'The crying did not last long, and you need not say "poor thing," for she knows how to take care of herself. What do you think she had on?—a pair of costly gold *kurras*.'

'Brass most likely,' was Mahir's comment.

'Do you think I am a fool, and don't know gold from brass?'

'They look very much alike.'

'Do they? I tell you she had *gold kurras* on, and, what is more, the hussy would not tell me where she

got them. But I suppose you don't want to hear anything about them, do you?'

'Yes, mother, I do. Say on.'

'Well, when she had been here for some time I asked her to take this bundle off the rack, and when she did so, her arms, of necessity, came beyond her *chudder*, and I noticed—what woman would not?—that she had a heavy *gold* bangle on each of her wrists. When she saw me look at them she started, became frightened, and tried to withdraw her arms below the *chudder;* but I was determined to see them, and I did. I naturally asked her who gave her the bangles; she would not answer, but rose at once to go, and I could not prevent her going, could I?'

'What about her clothes? Did she take them away?'

'No; she forgot all about them. She had a very nice *new saree* on under her *burqa* that I could see, so I suppose she knows where to get clothes when she wants them.'

Mahir's perplexity now reached a climax, and his curiosity, always a dominating feature in his character, was excited to the highest pitch. His jealousy was blown into a flame, and, with gross unreasonableness, too common in such cases, he swore he would meet Moradun face to face and settle matters with her. Now that she seemed, in some mysterious way, to be eluding him—to be slipping away from him, her possession became to him the main object of his life. After all, she was the only woman he had ever really loved; his passion

for Lateefun was merely a sentimental one. He did not know her at all, though her extreme loveliness had attracted him, and his pride was flattered by the thought of an alliance with such an ancient and once influential family as hers. But recent events, particularly her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Abdulla, had quite driven out all the romantic feelings that Lateefun had ever inspired in his heart, which now seemed to have room for no one but Moradun.

Although weary with the day's fruitless search, he went out again. The girl had, at least, not been murdered at Niaz Beg. That was certain; and he might now venture to ask more openly about her than he had dared to do before.

Driven by jealousy, he went to the neighbourhood of Ajeet Singh's shop and haunted the locality till the *mistree*, annoyed by his suspicious, prying manner, asked him pointedly if he was hanging about there to give him a very big order, for surely it must be something *very big* to require so much deliberation.

This question, with the ironical manner of it, rather disconcerted Mahir, and caused him, after the exchange of a few hot words, to quit the spot and go elsewhere. That same day, however, after an hour or two spent in careful inquiry, he traced Moradun to the outskirts of the village, than which a more uninviting spot could hardly be imagined—a place where the mean ruins of paltry mud-built huts were mouldering amidst the festering refuse of the town.

'What are you doing in such a place as this,

Moradun, instead of being in your own home?' he said kindly to the girl, who, in an attitude of the deepest dejection, was sitting alone, near a wretched mud wall, on a pile of weather-stained and crumbling bricks.

'What home?' she asked, and then added quickly: 'Surely you have for the past six weeks quite abandoned me to *kismet;* you thought me capable of being the murderess of the girl you loved. Oh, Mahir Din, is that all you know about me! Thank God, everyone did not think so badly of me! But why meddle now? Whatever is written in my fate will, no doubt, be accomplished.'

'Forgive me, Moradun, and come home,' pleaded Mahir. 'Come home, beloved, and you shall have no cause to complain! I, too, have been in trouble' —saying this he took her caressingly by the hand. She drew it away gently but firmly, saying:

'Oh yes! I ought not to forget you have been very much troubled in mind lately about the Christian wife of a Christian friend, so much so that you have not found time to even mention my name to bibi sahib.'

Without appearing to notice the taunt conveyed in these words, Mahir asked:

'Did I not hear your voice some days ago, just after nightfall, near Niaz Beg, calling loudly for help? What happened? Tell me all, Moradun. Come, dear, you *must* tell me everything.'

A troubled look came into the girl's face as she said quickly:

'Niaz Beg! What are you talking about?

Leave me to my fate, Mahir Din, leave me to my fate.'

'I dare say it is very much to your taste,' he answered rather sourly, 'since it brings you massive gold bangles.'

'Bibi sahib has told you!' said Moradun, rising briskly from her hard seat with flashing eyes, for the sting of bibi sahib's suggestion had entered her heart. 'Yes, I have gold bangles, Mahir;' and she held up her beautiful rounded arms for him to see the *kurras*, while her veil slipped back, displaying her perfect form to advantage; 'but God is my witness they were got honestly, and I do not want them.'

'Ah, that is better!' said Mahir admiringly, at the same time putting his arm round her. 'Tell me all about the *kurras*. Are they really gold?' looking at them critically. 'How did you get them?'

'I got them from inside the ground;' and as she made this statement a look of dismay passed over her face.

'Inside the ground! Where? Tell me everything, and about that night at Niaz Beg, and where you have been all this time. Come, tell me,' he pleaded, pressing her against his breast; but she repulsed him gently, though her eyes filled with tears.

'I cannot tell you to-day,' she answered; 'some other day. Perhaps to-morrow.'

'Then you won't tell me?'

'Not to-day, Mahir, not to-day. To-morrow if I am alive.'

'If you are alive! Why, who will dare to harm you?'

'I don't know.'

'*Why* won't you tell me about yourself?'

'Because I love *you* with all my heart.'

'This is very strange talk indeed.'

'Well, let it pass, and if I am alive to-morrow I'll tell you all.'

'But you can't stay here. Get under shelter somewhere.'

'Please leave me, good Mahir,' pleaded the girl, kissing his hand, 'and to-morrow if I am alive I will explain *everything* to you.'

Mahir, baffled, madly jealous and intensely annoyed, went sulkily away, muttering something about Ajeet Singh, whom he now knew had interested himself heart and soul in Moradun's case; but when he had gone a few yards he turned and looked back at her kindly, for had she not said that she loved him with all her heart, and, in his present frame of mind, he longed for her companionship, and could not bear the thought of losing her.

Moradun, who had not noticed that he had turned again to look at her, dropped upon her seat of crumbling bricks and wrung her hands in bitter grief. He came back, threw his warm shawl over her, and then hurried homewards.

'What can all this mean?' thought Mahir, as he walked silently away. 'Moradun may be justly angry with me. I can understand that. But those gold bangles, worth hundreds of rupees—what do they mean? Where could she have got them?

"Under the ground"—what stuff! I'll be bound it was from Ajeet Singh. But if so, why did she cry for help the other night at Niaz Beg, and why is she with valuable ornaments on her person, homeless, and sitting where the meanest beggar would not care to rest a moment? There is a strange mystery about it all. And then, how came she to be in the lane when Lateefun was killed? That also needs clearing up. I shall get at the bottom of this somehow. Before daybreak I shall be here again, and keep a watch over her. She is safe enough where she is, for not even a dog would come prowling about a spot like this on a cold winter night.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

DISCORDS.

'MOST wonderful are the ways of God, dear George, most wonderful, and past finding out!' Thus wrote the missionary to his brother in England. 'In regard to the murder of my dear convert, you remember, I told you that the evidence against the woman Moradun was overwhelming. But notwithstanding that, it has now been proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the murderer was a Muhammadan fanatic, who killed the poor girl, his widowed daughter-in-law, *because she became a Christian!* Think of it! *Because she became a Christian!* I send you a copy of our local newspaper, from which you will be able to gather all the leading particulars of this strange tragedy.

'Feeling my responsibility in the matter, as the human instrument employed by a higher Power in the conversion of the unfortunate young couple, I went to the mother's house to see what consolation I could give her in her affliction, and to obtain, if possible, some tidings of Abdulla, whose strange disappearance has distressed me greatly. I had a most painful and unexpected experience. The bereaved

mother—perhaps demented by the loss of her beautiful and only child—met me on the threshold of the house, and, with her white hair flowing in great ripples to her knees, cursed me in a way that is possible only to an Oriental.

'In a paroxysm of deadly hatred the old woman poured out the vials of her wrath upon me, and was terrible in her tragic fury, yet she so strikingly resembled her dead child, that I must own I shrank from her scathing words, which consigned me to the undying flames of hell and the living horrors of putrefying leprosy. I was glad, indeed, to get away without delay, for a small crowd of persons, attracted by her ravings, was beginning to collect about me, and I feared evil consequences from their evident sympathy with the woman.

'While those hideous curses are still ringing in my ears, I console myself with the reflection that I did my duty, and that the spirit of the poor girl, purified from all earthly stains, is now in the arms of her blessed Redeemer. But this experience has, I must confess, been a bitter trial to me. May I never have another such experience in all my life! Last night I dreamt that Lateefun stood before me, smiling and beautiful as when she came to be married, and as I regarded her she grew older and older, her fresh colour became pale and then yellow, her black hair gray and then white, the lustre of her eyes faded and the orbs sank in their sockets, dark shadows spread gradually over her rounded features, and care-lines were ploughed in her soft flesh. Then, while I stood and wondered, she lifted her now

withered arms and cursed me. I struggled back to wakefulness, horrified by the vision. This will show you how much I have been affected by the tragedy to which I feel I have contributed, and by the denunciations of that mad woman. Of Abdulla, I regret to say, I have not yet got any trace whatever.'

The missionary had written thus far when, after a gentle tap at the door of his room, the Rev. Mr. Jones, a brother missionary, stepped in.

'I hope I am not disturbing you,' he said blandly.

'Not in the least,' said the Padre sahib, looking up from the letter. 'I was just writing to my brother; but there is no hurry about it. The mail does not go out till to-morrow.'

'Yes, there is time enough to write our home letters.'

'I was just telling my brother that we have no tidings about Abdulla.'

'It is a very sad affair,' said Jones; 'very sad and very strange. Do you know, I have been thinking, more than ever, that it is far better to get our converts from amongst the simple, unsophisticated peasantry, or even the outcasts (such as *choorahs*, *chamars*, and *dhobies*), than amongst the well-born, highly-strung, very sensitive, and over-sentimental classes who come to us for higher education.'

'I don't know about that, Jones,' was the reply. 'Your converts—excuse my saying it—are often hardly Christians. If what I hear be true, a large majority of them are half-Pagans still. Am I right?'

'Partly, I must admit. But surely it has been the same amongst the earliest Christians in all countries. After three or four generations our half-Pagan Christians, as you call them, will be succeeded by men and women who have quite outgrown the Paganism of their forefathers—that is, of course, provided there is no relaxation of steady missionary effort and Christian teaching. That is how I look at the matter. And this conversion of the outcast population and the aboriginal races has an important political aspect too, with which, however, I, as a missionary, have no special concern, though I cannot close my eyes to it. The upper and educated classes, as far as I can see, are at present more actively hostile to Christianity than I have ever known them to be.'

'Unfortunately, it is so,' responded the Padre sahib, still holding his pen in his hand. 'You are quite right; their hostility is very pronounced, and more organized than before, and their attitude towards our religion and ourselves anything but hopeful.'

At this point in the conversation the 'bearer' came in with a card on a tray. The missionary took it and read out:

'SARFARAZ KHAN,
'*Student in the Fourth Year Class*,
'MEDICAL COLLEGE.'

'Here is one of the educated young men,' he said thoughtfully. 'I suppose we must see him.'

'*Salaam do!*' This to the 'bearer' by whom the young man was thereupon ushered in.

The missionary, with a courteous smile, requested the visitor to be seated. He took a chair, sat rather awkwardly, as if ill at ease, and then, at an inquiring look from the missionary, said in English:

'I have come, sir, in the hope that you will kindly give me some news of my friend and townsman, Abdulla.'

'I regret very much,' replied the Padre sahib, 'that all our efforts to trace him have been quite unsuccessful.'

'Pardon me, respected sir; but may I ask you, as one who is by profession a teacher of virtuous conduct, whether this is really true? The people are saying in the bazaar that Abdulla has been hidden away!'

'By whom?'

'By the missionaries.'

'No, young man, that is not the case. Hidden away he may be, but *not* by the missionaries. You may contradict that report on my solemn assurance.'

'We have been doing our utmost,' added the Rev. Mr. Jones, 'to find Abdulla, but we have not succeeded in our quest.'

'Then I will go myself and look for my friend.'

'What is your object?' asked the missionary.

'My object, sir, is to find my friend, and, if possible, bring him back to reason.'

'And what do you call reason, young man?' said Mr. Jones.

'Not theology,' was the prompt reply.

The two missionaries exchanged glances.

'Oh! that's what reason is, is it?' said the Padre sahib. 'Do they teach you that in the Medical College, my young friend?'

'Sir, in the Medical College I am taught to use my faculties intelligently and my hands skilfully in order to alleviate human suffering as much as possible. But theology, sir, leads to strife, and sometimes, as in Abdulla's case, to death.'

'May it not lead to life eternal?' said the Padre sahib with much feeling. 'You are a Mussulman, and you say——'

'I am a medical student, sir,' said Sarfaraz, interrupting him.

'I see,' said Mr. Jones, 'a materialist—eh?'

'I am a practical man, sir,' was the reply, 'and have come to inquire about Abdulla.'

'Well, well,' said the missionary with a sigh, 'I hope you will find Abdulla and bring him back, at any rate to Lahore,' looking, as he uttered these last words, significantly at Mr. Jones, who smiled in response.

'I will try, sir, if you will tell me when and by whom he was last seen, and under what circumstances.'

'Yes, you shall know everything; but, surely young man, if you are not a Muhammadan, you must have some religion. Every rational man must have a religious faith,' said Mr. Jones with professional importance.

Sarfaraz did not reply at once to this challenge; but after a moment's hesitation he said:

'Sir, this is a question to which I have given much thought. I am not a learned man, only a humble student, but it appears to me that the permanent exciting cause of the religious sentiment is the mystery which surrounds life, and as we cannot hope that that mystery will ever be cleared up for mankind, it is quite safe to predict that religion, in some form or other, will always play an important part in the life of man.'

The missionary gave an approving nod.

'But, sir,' continued Sarfaraz, 'when this vague sentiment is forced into dogmatic forms, and crystallized into exclusive creeds which are supported by secular authority, or by excited, and too often ignorant partizans, then I say it is a great pity that this should be.'

'Humph!' grunted Mr. Jones; but neither of the missionaries seemed disposed to prolong a conversation which, from their point of view, promised no good results, and the Padre sahib said, looking at his watch and then at Mr. Jones:

'I have an engagement at four o'clock. Shall we consider Abdulla's case? What do you say, Jones?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Mr. Jones, who proceeded at once to impart all the facts he knew about Abdulla's last appearance at the mission station to Sarfaraz, and the latter having carefully noted all the important points, took his leave, promising to let the missionary know the result of his self-imposed task of searching for the missing convert.

As he left the room Mr. Jones remarked:

'That is a specimen of your educated young men.

This time one who, under purely secular teaching and Western science, has become a materialist, or agnostic, or secularist, or atheist, or something else equally hopeless. We have, indeed, manifold and terrible difficulties to contend with in our work, and not a few of them created by the precepts and example of our own countrymen.'

'That is true, indeed,' assented the Padre sahib, 'quite true. Have you taken note of the flood of anti-Christian literature that finds its way here from Europe and America?'

'I have; but it reaches the educated city classes mostly. Our *mofussal* (country) youths, thank God, escape the contamination.'

A pause followed, and Jones, rising to leave the room, said: 'Do you know, I do hope that, after all, that young man won't find Abdulla.'

'Why?'

'Because I fear he would do him no good.'

With a sigh the Padre sahib resumed his letter, adding to what he had already written:

'However, a great friend of Abdulla's, a medical student, is going off to make a thorough search for him, and may, perhaps, succeed in finding him.'

He closed and addressed the letter, and then walked up and down the room with a cloud upon his brow.

In a little while the force of habit, and the strong professional instinct in the man, asserted themselves. He pulled himself together, called to his 'bearer' for his overcoat and hat, and, having put them on, stepped into his carriage, which was waiting under

the porch, and drove away, it may be with a very heavy heart, to preach once more, as he had done for five-and-twenty years, in the bazaar, where, as in most Indian bazaars nowadays, the storm and stress of religious conflict too often fill the air with painful discord.

On the side of the road opposite that on which our missionary had taken his stand, and was addressing a few listeners, a popular preacher, belonging to a new reforming sect of Hindus, was discoursing to a small audience on the beauty, and sufficiency for all religious purposes, of the inspired Vedas (the most ancient of the Hindu scriptures), while, not fifty yards from him, a Muhammadan *Moulvi* was, with the zeal of an iconoclast, energetically denouncing idolatry in all its various forms, holding up to ridicule and contempt all who rejected the *unity* of God, and branding as blasphemers all who dared give to a man the worship due to the Almighty alone.

The Hindu spoke fluently and well. Deliberately ignoring the grosser forms in which his religion finds practical expression in the India of to-day, this reformer went on to evolve, out of the much-tangled web of Hindu theology, a dream-picture of exalted and comprehensive toleration; reminding his hearers how the god Krishna had said to Arjuna, in the famous dialogue which the two held on the bloody and eventful battlefield of Kurakshetra: 'Even those devotees who, endued with faith, worship other Godheads, even they, O son of Kunti! worship me alone, though irregularly. In whatever manner men come to me, in the self-same manner do I

accept them.' And again: 'I am alike to all creatures; there is none hateful to me, none dear. They, however, that worship me with reverence are in me, and I also am in them.'

Had the preacher been questioned on the subject he would, in all probability, have indignantly repudiated the notion that these wonderfully magnanimous utterances of the divine Krishna could apply, or be extended in any way, to the followers of Christianity or Islam. It was not of them that the preacher, at any rate, was thinking. The point he wished to make clear was the essential unity of Hinduism in all its phases, notwithstanding its multitude of gods and its multiplicity of sects, his ulterior object being to weld together the distracted forces of Hinduism, so that it might hold its own against the persistent onslaughts of more aggressive creeds. He was a popular speaker, indulging in many witticisms, and had an appreciative though ever-changing audience, as people bent on their every-day business or special errands loitered for a few minutes to listen to his words.

The Christian missionary and the *Moulvi* also had their own small and attentive, if impermanent congregations, as the life of the town ebbed and flowed past them through the thoroughfare.

On a beautifully carved wooden balcony, overlooking the spot occupied by these preachers, sat, arrayed in her finery, the scarlet woman whom we met a while ago on the bridge of boats. She was smilingly and familiarly beckoning, over the heads of the crowd, to a young man, a prominent social

reformer, who passed that way lolling in a phaeton drawn by a pair of weedy horses.

Almost within earshot of the strife of creeds, a naked ascetic, seated under a rustling *peepul*-tree, was communicating an esoteric doctrine to his disciple, a young man with finely-cut features and very earnest eyes.

The disciple had approached the master and, after the most respectful salutation, had said:

'Maharaj! you who have spent so many years in contemplation, you who have travelled all over Aryavarta and Bhramavarta, and have even scaled the mysterious heights of Mount Meru, what say you to the turmoil of religious controversy which is going on yonder, in the street? Is it profitable?'

'Not for *you*, or such as *you*, my son,' replied the ascetic calmly, almost wearily. 'Sit down and listen.'

The seeker after wisdom, approaching nearer, seated himself in an attitude of respectful attention. The ascetic, pushing back his matted hair from over his placid eyes, proceeded to instruct him. And this was what he taught:

'The man who restrains and conquers his evil desires, his covetousness and lust, has not reached the *highest* stage. He has not reached *happiness;* for the mere conflict with his passions and desires involves an eternal struggle which is in itself *un*-happiness. No! only the man who *has no* desires and *no* passions has reached the highest knowledge, is perfect in *Brahma-vidya* (the soul-science) and has reached happiness. He would still be *impelled* by

the purity and exaltation of his character to do good to all, and to contribute to their happiness; but it would give him no *pleasure* to accomplish this, nor would it grieve him to be *unable* to do so. And why? Because he has reached a stage in which he has no wishes and no desires. He is *above* them all, and *above religion.* No prayers, no adoration, is necessary for him—*he is himself God.*

'Yes, my son,' continued the ascetic, still addressing his disciple, who listened with rapt attention; 'all religions are *prisons*, or, if you like, a *police* for the restraint and punishment of the thieves, liars, adulterers and other criminals who inhabit this perishable body, this veritable temple of the world-soul. Expel these abominations as not necessary to you, and you are *above all religions.*'

And all the while, streams of men and women hustled along the busy road under the shadow of the high houses, intent upon the serious business of this life, content for the most part with the beliefs they had inherited from past generations.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COMMON LOT.

In the dreary treeless desolation, without wall or fence or boundary, which is the Muhammadan cemetery, a lowly mound covers and marks the grave of the murdered girl. Thither two aged women, bowed down with sorrow, would totter every morning and every evening to wail and lament. In their deep grief they would often call her by name, as if she might possibly hear them and respond to their appeal.

Thus, in bitter affliction, these two worn-out women, who had lived their lives, and could hope for nothing more in this world, would spend hours in the dusk by the humble grave, calling upon Lateefun to come back.

One day an old priest passing that way sat down near the mourners, and addressed them thus:

'Why call in vain upon the dead, good mothers? Have you never heard that there was once a young prince upon whom his mother, the *rani*, so doted that she used often to tell him that if he were taken away she would assuredly die of grief upon his grave?

The young prince did die in his youth, and his mother would go daily to his grave. In her trouble she would cry:

'"Sakundir, my Sakundir, come back—come back to me!"

'After she had been bewailing her loss and imploring his return for many days, a voice came to her from below saying:

'"What do you want?"

'"I am calling Sakundir," was the reply.

'"Which Sakundir do you refer to? There are thousands of them here. Go away, good *rani*," continued the voice, "there are numberless Sakundirs here. Since the world began the earth has been the burial-place of men and nations, and Sakundirs are strewn by tens of thousands in the dust you are treading upon. Go home, good *rani;* this is the common lot."'

Having related this little story, the priest, who was a stranger to both the women, rose and departed; and they, too, leaving the spot, proceeded homewards, passing on the way a well-built brick-and-mortar monument over a recent grave. Many tiny lamps had been lighted on it, for it was Thursday, and this was the tomb of the fanatic *Ghazi*, Sher Afghan, who had suffered the extreme penalty of the law, and was now a saint.

'Ah, there lies the cruel hand that deprived us of our joy and hope!' sighed the *Moglâni*, as the flickering lights caught her eye. 'My pearl is in heaven, but Abdulla, where is he?'

'Where, indeed?' echoed her companion; and

then added, 'You know, of course, bibi sahib, that Sarfaraz has come back again?'

'Come back! Has he? I did not know. Has he found our boy?' was the eager inquiry.

'No, bibi sahib, he has not found him; but learned, on good authority, that he has become a wandering *faquir*, like his father—God bless him!—and has gone, it was thought, to holy Mecca.'

'Peace go with him!' said the *Moglâni* solemnly. 'Peace go with him to holy Mecca! It is better so. And *some* day the *Haji* will return.'

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDERGROUND.

AFTER Mahir had left Moradun amidst the ruined outskirts of the village, and when she had recovered some degree of composure, she, with the aid of a few sticks which she picked up in the immediate neighbourhood, made a small fire to keep herself warm, and crouching over it waited patiently, if nervously, hour after hour during the dreary and lonely darkness, which seemed instinct with ghostly sounds and strange creepy movements all around. Whom did she wait for thus, alone, and amidst such repulsive surroundings? Why did her thoughts seem to be crystallized in the prayer which was ever on her lips:

'Oh, *Parmeshwar* (God), grant that I may be able to see him, and that he may release me from my promise!'

Wearily for the poor girl did the night crawl along, till a soft, silvery light spread gradually over the eastern sky, and a waning moon, cold and clear, rose silently above the trees.

It was late and the village was soundless, save for the occasional barking of some restless dogs.

Moradun now stole out of her hiding-place, and took the road towards Niaz Beg. She walked cautiously, and in a couple of uneventful hours had reached the spot where Mahir had heard her cries for help. Concealed beneath the free end of her *saree* she carried a sharp sickle.

Leaving the road, she traversed the open, uncultivated country for a few minutes, and came to a halt near the stem of a large acacia-tree, alongside the ruins, almost level with the ground, of some long-forgotten building. There, for a few minutes, she stood with palpitating heart. Then she knelt down near a hole in the ground and listened attentively. She tried timidly to peep into the gloom, and once or twice, with a timorous voice, almost inaudible from fear, she essayed the word 'Maharaj,' but no answer came. At last, with an appealing look towards the dimly-lighted heavens and the words 'for Mahir' on her lips, she lowered herself through the hole into a cave below, swallowed up, as it were, by the earth.

The cave, which was of considerable size, was dimly lighted by a single oil-lamp placed before a stone *lingam*, the symbol under which the Hindu god Siva, or Mahadeo, is worshipped. Behind the lamp and *lingam* sat, in the midst of a heap of ashes, an ancient ascetic, a mere skeleton, gaunt and naked, near whom, and about whose person, two or three large hooded snakes, sacred to Mahadeo, coiled and uncoiled themselves, hissing viciously all the while.

Moradun, almost petrified with terror, fell on her

knees with her face to the ground, and lay prostrate before the gaunt ascetic.

'Maharaj,' she said with faltering voice, 'either release me from my promise not to explain to my friends the events of the other night, or allow the deadly serpents whom you are now restraining to end my life at your feet.'

'Daughter,' said the old man, who kept pulling the angry reptiles back as they advanced towards Moradun, 'why do you intrude upon a dying man? What is your trouble now?'

'Maharaj, unless I can satisfactorily account for the gold bangles you graciously gave me, and for the circumstances under which I screamed for help the other night, when I fell into this temple of Mahadeo, my husband will surely hate me and drive me from his presence.'

'Ah, is that it? Then bring him here. The end is at hand. A few hours hence it will not matter at all whether the foolish, worldly crowd find the Rajah, or view this poor cave which has been his safe asylum for fifty years. Bring him here. What is the man's name?'

'Mahir Din.'

'Bring him hither.'

'To-morrow night, Maharaj?'

'No, this very night: for before the sun rises I may be no more. Seest thou not that I shall soon be free—for ever?'

'Oh, father, this is impossible; day is approaching, and it is far to go!' cried the girl in utter despair.

'What is your trouble, child?' said the *Sadhu* (Hindu ascetic) dreamily. 'My mind is growing dark—speak!'

'Oh, Maharaj, when you gave me these gold bangles'—and as she spoke she shrank away from a too-menacing serpent—'you made me swear by the life of the one I love best (that is my husband) not to tell anyone about'—here she moved again in terror—'not to tell anyone about this temple, or about the events of that night, lest your curse should blast my loved ones. I would not dare to brave the terrible curse of a holy *Sadhu* like you, for I know my punishment would be swift and sure; therefore I throw myself at your feet. Release me from my promise, Maharaj! you are to me as a god.'

'Ah! I see now,' said the *Sadhu* slowly. 'I release you from your promise, and now, woman, go!' gasped the aged ascetic.

The great serpents hissed and darted about in a most menacing way, coiling and uncoiling themselves, so that the sound of their scales rubbing against each other was quite audible in that gloomy underground chamber. It was only the feeble hand of the dying ascetic which restrained them from attacking the intruder.

No sooner had the *Sadhu* spoken than Moradun clambered out of the pit as quickly as she could.

She was so overpowered by the confined, noisome air of the cave, and the dreadful presence in it of the hooded cobras, that she only went a few feet from the small orifice, and then sat down to recover herself. Her seat was a stone with which someone in the ascetic's confidence—some devoted disciple

or other who ministered faithfully to the needs of the revered master and his strange bodyguard—most probably closed, during the day, the orifice of the *Sadhu's* abode.

While she still rested there, slowly recovering from the nervous excitement of her recent experiences in the cave, she heard, from the bowels of the earth beneath her, something like a scuffle and a smothered voice muttering incoherent words.

She started to her feet, unable to endure these subterranean horrors, and commenced hurrying away. The snakes, already disturbed and angered by the intrusion of an unwelcome visitor, and now excited by the unwonted paroxysms which harassed the dying *Sadhu*, rushed out of the cave, and one of them, with head erect, vindictively followed Moradun. Death seemed imminent as the huge cobra darted at her with expanded hood. There was no time for thought when with swift elusive movements the deadly serpent made for its quarry. Instinctively Moradun turned and struck at the reptile with her sickle, when it was barely a yard from her heel, and, fortunately, did not miss it; but the snake, only partially disabled by the blow, seemed by a sort of mad convulsive movement, which might almost be likened to a spring, to arrive in a great writhing coil between her feet. Petrified with the horror of her position, she did not move for a moment; and then, recovering herself, ran away as fast as she could over the uneven ground in the dim moonlight.

When she reached the public road, and had regained breath to some extent, and steadied her

nerves, dreadfully shaken by the terrors of her strange nocturnal adventures, Moradun walked on towards Mozung in a sort of dream, saying to herself as she went along:

'Now I shall be able to tell him all. Now I shall be able to answer bibi sahib about the *kurras*, for he, her son, will be no longer in danger from my disclosing the secrets of that awful night. I shall tell them all about it—how I wrenched myself away from the wicked *Yogi*, and fled in the darkness; how I hid from my pursuer behind the *babool*-tree, and suddenly, to my great astonishment, fell into the cave; and how the aged *Sadhu*, who had not seen a woman for fifty years, gave me his daughter's *kurras* because I resembled her, holding them out to me with his long *chimtas* (tongs) after he had passed them round Mahadeo himself. He had actually forgotten all about them till he saw me, actually forgotten them for fifty years. Ah, *Parmeshwar*, what dreadful troubles I have been through! Has any other woman ever known such horrors? Those awful serpents, how they did glare at me with their bright lidless eyes and hiss viciously round me, just as they did to-night! But now—praise be to God!—I shall be able to explain everything fully to Mahir Din, and he will surely forgive me. Yes, he will not turn me away when he knows the whole truth, and *why* I could not explain things. How could I have spoken about the cave and the *kurras* when the *Sadhu's* curse would have fallen upon him and perhaps killed him? But now I am free to speak. Thank God! I will tell him how I escaped from the *Yogi*, and how the

great *Sadhu*, who was once a Rajah, made me swear, by the life of the one I love best, not to speak of that cave or the events of that night. Maharaj said that if I did not keep my word he would blast my loved ones with his curse, so my lips were sealed; but now I can speak and tell my Mahir everything. These gold bangles must have belonged to a *rani*, and are too good for anyone except Daisy *baba*. They are hers; they are much too good for me,' and saying this, Moradun took them off her arms deliberately and tucked them away in the waist of her *saree*.

'Oh, that *Yogi!*' she soliloquised, as she walked along; 'what trouble and danger he has brought upon me! But he would have had a bad time, that saintly *Yogi*, if I had had *this* in my hand,' shaking the sickle menacingly. She had hardly done so when she dropped it with disgust, and no little superstitious dread, for she saw it was wet with blood, and, worse still, the blood of a serpent which had been sacred to Mahadeo. An overwhelming terror seized her, and a numbing chill seemed to creep into her limbs. The sight of blood, warm, red blood, recalled too vividly to her mind Lateefun's ghastly murder, and, thinking of it, she said to herself:

'Strange, I could not explain to the police why I went after the *ekkas* that dreadful morning before dawn. My mouth was shut even then for Mahir's sake. How could I possibly tell them what I had overheard him say to his brother, when my words might have raised suspicion against him? Ah, Mahir, you do not know all my love for you! However, the worst is past; things will be better soon. Yes, I

hope so; but, great God, help me! I am feeling terribly dizzy.'

By this time day was breaking, and she found herself near the walled village of Nawakote. Her legs refused to carry her any further; her nerves were shattered by her adventures during the past few hours, and by her long anxiety. A burning thirst seized her, and, with her head in her hands, she sat down under the big spreading tree at the gate of the village, and presently lost consciousness.

* * * * *

While Moradun had been going through the experiences of the long night, Mahir had tossed about uncomfortably on his *charpoy*, upbraiding himself for not having used more loving persuasion, or more masculine firmness, with the girl to induce her to quit the lonely, squalid place in which he had left her after sunset. As, with advancing night, the cold increased and the silence deepened, he felt for her forlorn condition more and more, realizing painfully, in the gloom and stillness which oppressed him, the cruel discomfort and serious danger of her position. He kept repeating to himself the words she had addressed to him when she had declined to explain her cries for help at Niaz Beg, 'Because I love you with all my heart!' and, though they puzzled him much, they flattered his vanity, and were as balm to his feelings. All through the night, whether sleeping or waking, Moradun, attractive, softly yielding, unselfish, and devoted, was ever before his mind's eye, and many thoughts of dear, delightful hours passed in her company crowded his brain bewilderingly.

With a tenderness which he had not felt before, he recalled her fidelity, and how she had risked her life, and actually shed her blood, for him. In his yearning towards the girl he felt that the mystery which now enshrouded her and baffled him would all be cleared away, and Moradun come out of the ordeal spotless, as she had already done, even when Fate itself seemed against her.

When the late moon rose, filling his chamber with a subdued light, he left his bed, and had a long smoke out of his brass hookah; but the tobacco did not bring him much comfort, and, unable to endure further suspense, he stole out to seek Moradun, whom, *explanation or no explanation*, he was fully resolved to bring home with him.

He hastened in the dim moonlight to the spot where he had left Moradun; but a small heap of ashes, still warm, was all he found in the place where he had parted from the girl in the abandonment of her grief. His disappointment, which was intense and bitter, was curiously mingled with feelings of resentment and wounded pride; but the desire to find her and once more regain her predominated over all other sentiments.

All day long, and for many a day afterwards, he haunted the place; but Moradun did not return to it.

CHAPTER XXVI.

EXPLANATIONS.

'I HAVE been very ill, bibi sahib, and I don't know for how long,' said Moradun, tottering feebly into the presence of Mahir's mother, but with the soft light of hope in her eyes. 'I have been at death's door, but, by the grace of God, have been permitted to revisit the world once more.'

'Yes, I see you have been ill. As you sow you must reap,' said the old woman unsympathetically.

'Quite true, my lady; and now I have come to explain *everything* to you—about the *kurras* and everything else.'

'What good can come of your explanations now?' was the chilly reply. 'But if you wish to tell me anything, why should I not listen?'

'Yes, bibi sahib, not only listen, but forgive. For, if the Almighty forgives us seventy times, shall our fellow-creatures not forgive us *once?*'

'Speak on, and say what is in your heart,' said Mahir's mother, who was really very curious to know what account the girl would give of herself and the *kurras*.

'May Allah prolong your life!' said Moradun, and

then proceeded in weary tones, due to her weak condition, but still animated by sweet hope, to detail, circumstantially and truthfully, all the events of her life since she was released from the custody of the police up to the time that she became unconscious at the gate of the village of Nawakote. Then she mentioned her long illness there — how long she could not tell—also the great kindness of the simple villagers during her helplessness.

Mahir's mother had been listening to the whole tale with close attention, sitting on her *piri* (stool), with the end of her hookah pipe between her lips, drawing the smoke into her mouth and puffing it out again in a leisurely way, while the water bubbled monotonously in the brass bowl. At this point of Moradun's narrative she inquired very pointedly:

'Where are your *kurras?*'

'I don't know,' was the reply; 'I have somehow lost them. No one at Nawakote seemed to know anything about them.'

'Very likely,' was the sarcastic comment, made between two puffs of smoke.

When the narrative was quite finished the old woman put her hookah aside, and burst out laughing derisively, saying:

'That is a very pretty story indeed; but it has taken you a long time to invent it.'

'Invent it, bibi sahib!' was the indignant response.

'Yes; what else? And, of course, *Sadhu-ji* is dead, so that no one can find him or ask him any inconvenient questions—eh?'

'But I can take you to his cave and *prove*——'

'Oh yes, prove—prove your own cleverness. I suppose you would have me believe that you have been privileged to see the famous Rajah and mighty magician who, as folks say, had, in a long-previous generation, built the *shivala* (temple), and had then retired into the earth, where no one dare disturb him, and whence he still watches over the fortunes of the temple he had founded; for it is well known—at least, so it is said—that he dies once in every hundred years, and then revives, to begin a new term of life underground. It is an old story, but I suppose you have only recently learnt it.'

'I have never heard the story, and perhaps it may be the same Rajah I saw, bibi sahib—it may be!' said Moradun excitedly. 'Why not?'

'Why not, indeed! Because your story is too good to be true. Don't tell me! I was born before you were. You have taken more than a month, it may be two months, to prepare your *kahanee* (tale), but I am not going to be taken in by your cleverness. And now let me tell you a *true* story. My son has gone to Karachee on important business, and will not be back just now. When he does return, he will be married, and we don't want a woman to come to this house who wanders about, God knows where, with gold *kurras* on her arms, and comes, after two or three months, with a story about dead Rajahs and live cobras to account for her evil doings. Our door is shut to you henceforth. If you want the things you left here, take them. The *tubla* (a sort of drum) would be useful in *Tibi*

bazaar. If the things don't suit your superior taste, I'll burn them, for they are not to pollute this house any longer. Now go! I have listened long enough to your nonsensical lies.'

Bitterly disappointed and utterly cast down, Moradun rose and staggered out of the house in silent humiliation. She had not dreamt of such a reception, and hope now died out of her sinking heart; for she felt that Mahir also would not believe her strange story, and would regard her as a mere wanton who, having ventured a flight on her own account and failed, was trying now to regain her old footing in his house by means of a most improbable tale to account for her suspicious errantry.

Surely the offended gods of her fathers were avenging themselves for her mad desertion of the old faith which had satisfied generation upon generation of her ancestors. But even at such a moment of darkness and despondency, she seemed to have but one god in her woman's heart, and that was neither Krishna nor Allah, but Mahir Din, with all his imperfections—Mahir Din, whose image she bore in her faithful bosom.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WEDDING DRUMS.

A FEW months later, in a small room which, but for the glorious sunlight which filled it, might have been called miserable, situated at the top of a high, dilapidated house in 'the city,' a woman lay upon a bit of mat with a new-born infant on her arm. She was smiling at it, her beautiful eyes full of tenderness, and saying:

'You, my birdie, shall whisper soft music into father's ear, and he will love me again. Yes, he will—he must love me again, even if he does have another wife, as bibi sahib wishes; for you are his first-born son, and the other, whoever she may be, cannot give him his first son, and the very image of himself, too; for he will see his own pretty gray eyes in yours, and his mouth and his nose and his chin,' touching each feature with gentle hand as she named them. 'He will see in you his very self reproduced, and he will rejoice with the joy of a man. We must soon be up and doing, loved one, and then we shall see better times. And your name shall be *Khoda Baksh* (the gift of God), for surely He sent

you to me to cheer my loneliness, and reconcile me to your father.'

She talked thus, in cheerful whispers, to the baby, as it lay, with wide-open eyes, against her warm breast. On account of the heat, both mother and child were very lightly clothed, and Moradun's dainty, rounded and well-proportioned limbs, with their brown satin skin, were freely displayed as she tended, with a mother's love, her new-born infant, while the Indian sun deluged the quiet chamber with a flood of glory.

As she unburdened her heart to her precious darling, holding him in a loving maternal embrace, he, all unconscious of his mother's hopes and fears, fell into a comfortable slumber, and Moradun, having risen from her mat, put up the chain of the door at the head of the stairs, and so fastened it from the inside. She then lay down again beside the babe, for she was very feeble, and the day was hot.

The little room she occupied, which was not as large as the one below it, was walled in only on three sides, the fourth side opening on a bit of flat terrace, a portion of the roof of the room beneath. From this diminutive terrace Moradun, before her infant came, would climb on to the roof of her chamber, and there make her bed under the open sky, and while preparing for slumber would converse with her neighbours on the adjoining housetops, to whom she would sometimes even sing a sweet song, or a pathetic ballad of former days. Her personal

charms and her remarkable vocal powers attracted general attention almost as soon as she had taken up her quarters in these lodgings, and it was not long before the girl, and something of her history too, became known pretty well in the neighbourhood, where also the barrister, Ram Nath, lived, at whose house, urged by feelings of lasting gratitude, she made her humble *salaams* on festival days and other suitable occasions.

When Moradun lay down beside her baby after fastening the door, she fell into a sound sleep, and a peaceful expression settled on her pretty features, for her heart was full of maternal love and the hope which is life to weary mortals. She slept comfortably hour after hour in the quiet afternoon, forgetful of her troubles, past or present.

As she slumbered, a shadow fell upon the open terrace, and, after a little while, a soft, unshod foot touched it noiselessly. The hot sun shone brightly on the person of a young woman who, with a look of great anxiety upon her face, crept stealthily towards the mother and her babe.

In her sleep Moradun moved a little, a smile upon her face. The crouching figure gave a start, and then remained motionless; but as the mother's heavy breathing reassured her, she crept forward, very cautiously, on all fours, and, with a gentle hand, removed the unconscious baby. Moradun stirred again in her sleep. The intruder hesitated. Would the mother wake before the deed was done?

No, she did not; and the woman, carrying the

tiny babe concealed under her *chudder*, crawled into the court and, with the assistance of the frame of an old *charpoy* which lay there, regained the flat roof of the adjoining house. She moved quickly and silently along in the blinding sunlight from one housetop to another without being observed, for it was far too hot for anyone to be on the terraces at that hour of the afternoon.

The large room to which the woman carried her stolen burden was more comfortably furnished than such rooms usually are, for the master of the house had eaten the regulation number of dinners at one of the London Inns of Court, had passed the required examinations, and was an English barrister-at-law, or, as his wife and relatives usually said, a 'ballister.'

The outward signs of his European culture were a few pieces of furniture rarely to be found in Indian homes, where life proceeds under purely Oriental conditions—a substantial chest of drawers, surmounted by a good looking-glass, a mahogany wash-hand stand, on which stood a brightly-polished brass bowl, in place of a china one, and a handsome pink earthenware jug; also two chairs close against the wall, one of them supporting a small pile of law-books. But beyond these superficial traces of the effect of contact with Western life, there was really nothing European in the household and its management, or in the life and thought of its inmates.

Ram Nath, the master of the establishment, was the promising lawyer who had so skilfully conducted

Moradun's case. He was a busy man, devoted to his professional work, and content to let things go on in his household in accordance with the time-honoured customs of his caste. It was given out that he had joined a new *samaj* (society), established for the grand purpose of effecting the religious and social regeneration of India; but when questioned on the subject he usually disclaimed having actually become a member of the *samaj*, though he would admit that he *sympathised* with its aspirations, and sometimes subscribed to its funds. When he first returned home, with the impressions of his life at a Bayswater lodging-house still fresh in his mind, he commenced teaching his wife to read English, but not finding her an apt pupil, the lessons were soon given up.

In a very few months after his return home Ram Nath's experiences in England ceased to be a factor of any special importance in his life, which, under the influence of the elders of the family, conformed, outwardly at least, to all the accepted traditions of his caste.

Besides the furniture of European style already referred to, there were in the room a couple of *charpoys*, neatly covered with red shawls, and a few low stools. The floor was carpeted with a new and good Indian cotton *durree*.

On reaching this chamber, which she did by means of a narrow staircase from the roof, the woman laid the still sleeping babe upon her own *charpoy*, and then threw off her *chudder*.

She was young, almost a girl according to

European ideas, for she was barely two-and-twenty; but in the East she was already past her prime. In throwing off her *chudder*, she left herself by way of clothing only her ample and well-gathered cotton skirt of dark purple colour, edged with gold embroidery.

Upon her jet-black hair she wore, on the crown of her head, a cone-shaped gold ornament, secured in its place with gold chains, and her comely arms were well adorned with armlets and bracelets of the same precious metal. A large gold ring, ornamented with pearls, was suspended from her nose. She was unmistakably a woman of good caste, and of well-to-do family. Her complexion was fairer than that of many Southern Europeans. Her bright black eyes were arched over by strongly-defined eyebrows, and her thin, pink lips closed over two rows of perfect teeth.

Though the expression on her face was troubled, determination seemed to predominate in every line of it. A dreadful struggle was evidently going on within her, but her mouth indicated inflexible resolution.

Approaching one corner of the room, she struck a match, and, with unsteady hand, lit the wick of a brass lamp which stood before a tiny image, about six or eight inches high, of the goddess Kâli, mighty Kâli, who holds despotic sway over the imaginations of millions and millions of men and women south of the Himalayas.

The idol, which was made of baked clay, and

painted black, was by no means a work of art, yet it served its purpose. A ray of sunlight stealing through a window illuminated the form of the dread divinity, with her four extended arms, her unique girdle of amputated hands, and her blood-red tongue protruding from her large mouth. Unlovely it may be, but of its fascination for the Indian people there can be no doubt, and the woman regarded it with awe.

As soon as she had kindled the lamp, she removed the brass bowl from the wash-hand stand, and placed it before the dreadful goddess, and, as she did so, she turned back the corner of the carpet so as to put it out of the way. She did not by any means loiter over her work, but moved about with nervous haste, saying to herself, as she went through her self-imposed task:

'This is the *only* course left me now. The wise woman who has power over the *bhuts* (demons) said so, and *she* must know. I have tried everything—*pujahs* (religious ceremonies) by scores, pilgrimages to every shrine in Aryavarta—and I have spared no expense. This is the *only* chance left me. Ram Nath loves me, but he *must* have a son, as all good Hindus have. He says he does not care for these things, nor for Brahmins and *Shastras*. He belongs to the new *samaj*, and thinks very much like the English sahibs; but we are Hindus, of good family and superior caste, and his mother says she will give him another wife if no child is born to me. And the wise woman said it was best to take the son of

a Hindu who had gone over to another faith, for he would be reborn a Hindu, and perhaps a Brahmin. This infant does not know what life really is, and it will be *far better for him hereafter, that is certain.*'

As she was thinking thus, and hastily arranging some flowers before the idol, which stared at her fixedly with wide-open eyes, Khoda Baksh on the *charpoy* gave a little infantile whimper. She started up in sudden alarm at the unfamiliar sound, and, taking him from the cot, rocked him gently to prevent his waking up. Against the warmth of her bare body he nestled himself contentedly, seeking his mother's breast; but the woman held him away with a shudder, and, finding him whimper again, put the end of one of her fingers into his mouth to keep him silent.

In the house all was still. In the street, too, there was little, if any, sound.

With the babe in her arms, she approached the image of Kâli, repeating in a low, but clear and resolute tone, a formula she had learnt from the wise woman: '*O Kâli mai!* give this childless wife her heart's desire! See, great goddess, I offer you a life for a new life, and warm human blood!'

As she uttered the words, this pure and chaste woman, gently nurtured, naturally tender-hearted, steeped in religion and in superstition, with boundless faith in the gods of her fathers, but withal painfully ignorant, totally illiterate, and now driven to adopt what she believed the only course open to her, held the child out towards the goddess. Her

hands trembled as she did so, and the babe, now quite uncomfortable, gave a loud cry. Scared out of her senses, the woman, with one spasmodic movement, drew a sharp knife swiftly across the child's throat. The blood gushed into the polished brass bowl before the grotesque idol. There was now no sound in the chamber except the gentle gurgling of the thin red stream and the faint hissing sound of the collapsing lungs, as this ghastly sacrifice was being offered to propitiate the favour of the dreadful divinity. The woman's pale face was set, and her eyes protruded with the horror which now took hold of her, as she realized her own awful deed, and the sickening results of her hideous work. A sudden throb of drums in the hitherto quiet street shrieked 'Murder!' to her excited brain, and, overpowered with sudden dread, she swooned away before the goddess, with the human sacrifice lying helplessly huddled up in her lap.

* * * * *

At this moment Moradun was aroused by someone knocking at her door. 'Do get up!' said a girlish voice from the other side. 'There is a grand wedding passing down the street. They say it is the wedding of one Mahir Din, of Mozung. It is very grand; get up and see.'

'I am coming,' answered Moradun drowsily, hardly heeding what the girl said, but still catching the *name*, not without a spasm at her heart. With maternal instinct she put out her hand for her treasure, and found his place vacant. 'Where is my baby?' she

cried in terror, starting to her feet with the agility of one in exuberant health. 'Where is my baby?'

'What did you say?' asked the girl from the other side of the door. 'It is the wedding of one Mahir Din.'

'Where is my baby?' shrieked Moradun, turning about wildly, in vain search of her infant. 'O God! where is my darling?' she cried distractedly, while the wedding drums in the street drowned the poor woman's bitter cry, and mocked the last vain hopes she had fondly cherished.

THE END.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

In the foregoing tale I have tried to present, on a very restricted canvas, a sketch of one aspect—the religious aspect—of the complex and many-sided life of the natives of upper India, with its many amiable traits, its picturesqueness, its blind prejudices, its occasional fanaticism, and its almost complete absence of sympathy with Western feeling and sentiment. The European appears only fitfully in the story, just as he does in the real life of the Indian people, in whose social system he counts for little, except, perhaps, as a sort of erratic comet from mysterious far-off space, bringing weal or woe in some more or less incomprehensible manner.

It is my hope to be able to follow up this tale with two others, one illustrating the social life of the Indian people in its present transitional state; the other being devoted to the political movements and aspirations which the circumstances of the times and the conditions of British rule have called into existence in the ancient and highly interesting land of the Hindus.

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